



GREAT TANG IDYLL

BOOK 01

Pastoral Idyll

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

Great Tang Idyll

(田园大唐)

by

Pastoral Idyll

(田园如梦)

Synopsis

The Great Tang countryside with the warm sunlight, the golden wheat, and white herons in flight.

Zhang Xiaobao: “I didn’t think my ability could change any great events. My thinking was simple—to change my family’s living conditions. But oftentimes, things don’t happen according to how you think it will. As I was working to improve my family’s living conditions, a lot of things happened. How do you say, hmm... Simply put, it was the butterfly effect? No, no, no, this metaphor is a bit too flashy. Crudely put, I am the rat turd dropped inside the pot.”

Wang Juan: “Ever since I came to this era together with an International Criminal Swindler, I declare that this world no longer has any swindlers.”

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Prologue

Year 20XX, afternoon, seated in a hidden room somewhere in the Chinese capital are a group of people as they looked at pictures that flashed by periodically on the screen in front of them.

“This person, Zhang¹ Xiaobao², male, currently 35 years old, lived in an orphanage as a child in H City, T Province.³ At the age of 6, the orphanage was washed away in a flood and he was pulled out of the water and onto land then by the efforts of the orphanage director who was surnamed Zhang. Director Zhang unfortunately died in sacrifice. Afterwards, the person who those in the orphanage called Xiaobao took on the surname of Zhang and then disappeared.”

A 40-something year old man pointed at the group picture of the orphanage being shown onscreen, singling out a timid looking child to the others. With a screen transition, another picture appeared. It was still that of a child, only the face was a lot older appearing to be around 10 years or so without the shyness seen in the previous picture.

The middle-aged man’s voice sounded again: “This picture was taken of Zhang Xiaobao in the juvenile detention center when he was 9. He was detained as the scale of his theft was too great. A month later, he led a team of over 10 people that were gathered from the juvenile detention center in a successful escape. He then once again disappeared off the records.”

When another picture appeared, the middle-aged man continued lecturing: “This is a photo of Zhang Xiaobao when he was

incarcerated at the age of 17. Because he regularly trained his body, he appeared to be in his twenties. According to further research on our part, this was his 3rd time being incarcerated. We only later realized that he was being imprisoned for the sake of entering the prisons. Every time he committed a crime, it was always just enough to sentence him to half a year of detention. With the falsification of his age, no one knew of his minor status.

Everybody, please look at this next picture. This is a photo of him at 24 with his 9th prison entry. Each time he went in, the names he used would all be fake and his appearance would be slightly altered. Our understanding is that his goal with his imprisonment was to learn the skills of the inmates with special abilities.

After each time he was released, he would commit a crime, stealing the fortune of a government official numbering in the tens of thousands as compensation to train his skills. The last time he entered prison was the year he was 26. Due to an inability to locate his previous records, it was only for 3 months and was specifically for the sake of bidding farewell to a 'Master' of his.

After this, the crimes he committed increased with the local police being unable to capture him in spite of the outstanding arrest warrant on him. After research by the relevant departments, the skills he learned from his many years of incarceration include pickpocketing, hard qi gong⁴, lock-picking, driving, financial fraud, physical disguise, vocal alteration, counterfeiting, surveillance and counter-surveillance, wilderness survival, and special combat skills.

Of course, there is also the most important escape technique.

During the course of several arrests, our local police discovered that he can jump straight down from a 15 meter height unharmed and can climb up 9 meter high walls bare-handed. He is also adept in criminal psychology, behavioral psychology, social psychology, and other related disciplines. He has been designated as an extremely dangerous criminal.”

Having said this, the middle-aged man sighed lightly. Everyone else also sighed at the same time. Whether they were for Zhang Xiaobao’s criminal records or for his ability and tenacity was unknown.

The exhalation seemed to slightly soothe everyone and the middle-aged man continued lecturing: “After Zhang Xiaobao turned 28, our relevant departments could not find any information on him until last year. Only when data on case after case of international fraud was consolidated did we regain news of him.

After turning 28, Zhang Xiaobao bid farewell to his usual *modus operandi* of theft and blackmail of government officials to start using the other skills he learned to carry out financial fraud on a massive scale. In our country, by using various pretexts, he primarily defrauded senior officials of their own money or through their taking out large bank loans. Overseas, he mainly swindled several financial institutions.

For each scam, he changed his identity. According to the calculations of the relevant departments, the total amount defrauded has reached the scary sum of 160 billion U.S. dollars. But we are unable to ascertain the location of where this money

actually is.”

When everyone heard this number, they all deeply inhaled. Rather than being filled with hatred for criminals, their eyes were filled with a type of admiration they could not give voice to. The middle-aged presenter, who was also reeling in the shock brought upon by this figure, only resumed speaking after some time: “This time, we finally know Zhang Xiaobao’s whereabouts. This morning, we received intelligence that Zhang Xiaobao is already on the plane arriving this afternoon from America to H City, T Province. This time, the name he used is the one he registered with the Civil Affairs department after the flood back when he was 6 years old, Zhang Xiaobao. The identity papers he is using are also for the name he registered back then.

We were thus able to get a handle on his identity—only we’re not clear of his motive for doing so. Our mission is to arrest him and get the location of that money. According to our people who have been on his tail the entire time, directly after getting off the plane, he went to the orphanage’s old address, which is now the site of a supermarket. To prevent his causing chaos, the strategy for our plan this time is to first approach, then observe, and finally capture.”

At this, the middle-aged man fell silent, his gaze sweeping across the people in front of him to finally rest on a woman in her thirties. Nodding at her, he said: “Wang Juan⁵, this time, the mission of approach and observation will be given to you. Do you have the confidence to finish the mission?”

“Definitely will complete the mission!” The woman called Wang

Juan stood up as she solemnly answered.

However, after everyone had left, a hint of doubt flashed through Wang Juan's eyes. In the past, she had taken on many cases and she had always been brimming over with confidence. But this time, she wavered. Or rather, it could be said to be apprehension. She, who had earned a master's degree in law at 16 to directly enroll into military school and major in the tactical command disciplines before graduating at the age of 20 and then joined the Women's Special Ops Unit to study combat and surveillance techniques.

After joining the police department, she specialized in the investigation and solving of major cases, not ever failing a single time. Every single arrested criminal deserved what they got. But this time, she felt uneasy inside. She also had a copy of Zhang Xiaobao's records and they were more detailed than the Commissioner's presentation.

Zhang Xiaobao was definitely a criminal. However, his theft was initially from government officials, which gained him a lot of money each time. This only proved that these officials had a lot of money. The later scams mainly defrauded those officials looking for political achievements, the amount of money swindled from them totaling around 30 billion U.S. dollars. The rest of the money was gained from his scams abroad. According to the intentions of the higher-ups, getting their hands on the money was the most important right now.

Other than theft and fraud, Zhang Xiaobao didn't seem to have any robbery cases on record—and what's more, no rape cases,

either. Based on his abilities, he definitely had the capabilities to do both. What was he actually thinking inside?

Sucking in a deep breath, Wang Juan made herself try not to think about those things she shouldn't think about. The orders she received was to approach, observe, and when appropriate, capture. Other considerations were useless. It was best to just get the arrest.

In H City, T Province, a casually dressed man stood in the entrance of a large supermarket. He appeared to be in his thirties. His face was a bit sickly pale face as he motionlessly looked around the supermarket with his eyes while he took a phone call.

“Big Brother⁶ Zhang, the police there have already made their move. You really don't want to try somewhere else? Maybe there's still a chance. If you want to leave, we can immediately arrange for someone to escort you back.” A woman's voice could be heard on the phone.

“No need to. Any hospitals I could find, I already did. I still have half a month of life left, I wish to die in my hometown. The arrangements have been made for what I ordered?” The man calmly replied.

“Big Brother Zhang, rest assured. The 4 funds have already been set up. Whether you're here or not, they will continue operating based on your ideas. We don't need to run scams anymore. The industries we invested in will double in assets after a few years. According to your wishes, it will be guaranteed that within 20 years, every child of the homeland will be able to study in well-lit classrooms and none of the orphanages will be washed away by the

floodwaters. Big Brother Zhang, you really don't want to reconsider? There's another area you haven't tried. Folk remedies can be very effective." The woman's voice rose again in persuasion.

"It's too late. I know my own illness. After I'm gone, do a good job. Also, it's not my wish but my Grandpa Director's⁷ wishes. All right, let me indulge my final sentiments about this place for a bit." The man was still calm in demeanor, his face devoid of any expression after he ended the call as if his surroundings were at a distance very, very far removed from him.

Ten minutes passed, half an hour passed, an hour passed as the mass of people in front of the supermarket never stopped changing. The only thing unchanging was the man's posture as he stood there, the pupils that had already lost focus flickering with something unknown within.

"Ever since this supermarket was built 4 years ago, it's been constantly busy, servicing many customers each day. At the same time, it's also generated a lot of local tax revenue." After an unknown amount of time passed, a woman's voice rose at the man's side.

Upon hearing her voice, the man slowly turned his head to see the delicately pretty face of a woman in her thirties. He said with a slight nod of his head: "Yeah, the supermarket appeared and the previous orphanage then moved to an even more remote place. Wonder how much of the tax revenue has flowed into the pockets of those it shouldn't flow into? Wonder how much of this money will be spent on these orphans? Who is sipping wine in laughter?

Who is crying tears in silence?”

For a time, the woman didn't know how to answer. After a while, she finally spoke as if unloading a great burden: “You are rather full of worries and sentiments. There are some things you shouldn't think about. Three years ago, that orphanage relocated. The children live pretty well. There are still good people in this world.”

“Of course, I know this. ¥6,257,900⁸ was invested in there with a maintenance allowance of 150,000 every year—six people who thought to touch this money died—how could the little brothers and sisters not live well? Whomever touches the money for ‘Grandpa Director's Orphanage Home,’ dies.” The man smiled as he spoke with disdain.

“Oh? You actually are aware of it in such detail?” The woman asked with astonishment.

“The money I invested, the people I killed—how could I not know of it? Isn't that right, Ms. Wang Juan?” The man's tone of voice calm as ever.

Wang Juan didn't think that her cover would be blown the moment she appeared and furthermore, that she would be greeted by name. Deciding to forego any further probing, she immediately reached inside her chest. But before she could get out her gun, a powerful hand had already clamped down on her shoulder. At the same time, the man's voice sounded: “No need for such bother. It wouldn't do to disturb others by pulling a gun out in public. In using my real name to return this time, I wasn't thinking of

escape. I'll go with you and let you successfully complete your mission. What do you say, legendary graduate of the Women's Special Ops Unit, Ms. Tyrant Flower?"⁹

Wang Juan struggled once or twice before discovering there was no way to get free. Nodding, she said: "All right, I hope what you say is true, International Criminal Swindler, Comrade Zhang Xiaobao. Otherwise, don't assume that grabbing me will make the snipers let you off easy."

"Relax. If I wanted to run, I would already have run. In this kind of busy place, what can snipers do? But you guys might be disappointed. The 160 billion is gone but I left 5 million for you guys as payment. 160 billion is the amount you have proof of but the actual sum is far greater. I hope that before I'm executed by the firing squad that you'll keep me company and I'll give you guys the 5 million. As a man, I believe the greatest joy is to have a beautiful girl at my side before dying." Zhang Xiaobao laughingly said as he stared at Wang Juan's icy face.

"Where's the money?" Wang Juan reflexively asked, in a daze upon hearing that the money was gone.

"You guys will never know. I hear there are a lot of nerve-stimulating chemicals. You guys can test them on me—see if I spill this secret or not. Remember to use a larger dosage. I normally take too much of this type of medicine so smaller doses won't work." Zhang Xiaobao removed his hand.

"You do drugs?"

“More or less—not too much of a difference. When I’m in pain, I keep worrying that an overlooked flaw will come up during a swindle or investment so I’d take some medicine to feel better. Let’s go. I’d like to go be with my Grandpa Director as soon as possible. If you’re not in a hurry, you can come with me to the liangfen¹⁰ shop at the end of this street for a bowl of liangfen. My treat.

I ate it once the year I was 5. Grandpa Director took me there. It was the most delicious thing I have ever eaten in my life. Ever since then, I haven’t had it no matter how much money I had. Today, I can finally have it. I’ve fulfilled Grandpa’s last wishes. I feel like I’m once again worthy of a bowl. I sent people over to double-check. It’s still the same uncle from that year. Back then, it was ¥2 a bowl. Now, it’s ¥5 a bowl. I hope the taste hasn’t changed.”

Appearing not to realize that he had been captured, Zhang Xiaobao looked in the direction of the street as he spoke, his gaze full of nostalgia.

She didn’t know why. After hearing these words, Wang Juan felt as if the innermost part of her had been touched. Dazed, the desire to complete her mission finally suppressed any other ideas that shouldn’t have appeared. Seeing that this supermarket entrance had too much foot traffic and considering that there should be fewer people at the liangfen shop so any possible injuries would be reduced in the case of a conflict, she nodded. Wrapping her arm around one of Zhang Xiaobao’s arms, she walked towards the street.

“Don’t move! None of you move! Don’t come near! Whoever comes near me, I’ll blow them all up with me!”

After Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both took only a few steps, they suddenly heard a voice. The both of them simultaneously looked back, only to see a man in puffy clothing who had one hand tightly gripped on a small child that was less than 2 years old and another hand pressing on something as he vigorously yelled.

Wang Juan’s first thought was that Zhang Xiaobao wanted to escape and had deliberately arranged for a person to create a distraction. When she turned to look over at him, Zhang Xiaobao’s eyes was flicking back and forth between the child and the man’s other arm. His previously calm expression had unexpectedly changed into one of surprising fury in that instant as he forced the words out of his mouth: “I didn’t arrange for this. I, Zhang Xiaobao, would not deign to use this type of method. Use your identity to get the people around here to leave. I’ll think of a way to save the child.”

“That’s no good. I can’t trust you. My mission is to take you back with me. There are other people to take care of anything else.” Wang Juan hesitated for a bit before she vetoed Zhang Xiaobao’s suggestion.

“If I wanted to run, you wouldn’t even be able to stop me. Save that child, I’ll give you another 150,000.”

“You know that child?”

“No, I don’t know him. I saw the helplessness in his eyes. They’re just like the eyes of the younger brothers and sisters from the orphanage that I saw drowning in the water back then. Only, I survived and they died.”

“It’s still no good. I can’t care about anything outside of the mission. I must make sure that you’re successfully brought back.” Wang Juan struggled internally for a moment before refusing again.

Just as the both of them were trying to persuade the other, a legion of police had already arrived. Their quick arrival was undoubtedly due to this supermarket being of foreign investment.

“Release the hostage in your hands. If you’re seeking clemency, you can make your requests.” Of the arriving police officers, one must have been of senior rank as he took cover behind a police car using a loudspeaker to yell out at the ‘bandit’ standing in front of the supermarket entrance.

“Fuck your ma’s leniency! Go hide further away! Whoever dares come here, I’ll die together with this child! Money! I want money! And a plane to get me out of here! I want to go to the Vatican!” Still holding the child, the ‘bandit’ loudly yelled back at the police.

“See, the robbers nowadays are all smarter than you cops. They know that what you say are all lies and even know to run to those places that don’t have a very good relationship with our country.^{[11](#)} Now, you should step forward. Whether I can believe it or not, this

idiot of a chief actually has dared to arrange for a sniper.” Zhang Xiaobao tried his best not to be agitated as he spoke to Wang Juan.

Wang Juan glanced at the loose wire style of the man’s explosive device. Bringing Zhang Xiaobao in tow, she walked in front of the police chief and pulling out her ID, she ordered: “No matter what the circumstances, the snipers are not allowed to shoot. Protect the hostage’s safety. Get the negotiators to start talks and stabilize the criminal’s mood.”

The police chief also started to react as to what the explosive device was and while he made arrangements for later on the one hand, on the other, he sent people to comfort the child’s parents as they were currently sobbing uncontrollably while they pled to be the one exchanged with the hostage.

“Wang Juan... Maybe I should go. This person... Let me give him a chance.” Zhang Xiaobao really didn’t wish to wait. He didn’t even care about Wang Juan, immediately stepping forward as he spoke. Wang Juan couldn’t pull him back in time and Zhang Xiaobao was already approaching the wary looking bandit as he said:

“Brother,¹² I thought you were a smart person but I didn’t think you’d be this dumb. How much money can you scam from grabbing a kid? From your mention of the country you want to run to, you should have some sense. Why don’t you grab me? See what happens if you exchange me for the kid? Look at what this is. Swiss banknotes, Citibank promissory notes, HSBC promissory notes, and a whole mess of other things. Know [Older] Bro’s¹³ identity now? Trade or not—if you do, I’ll fulfill your request. If not, even

if you escape today, I'll spend 10 million in reward money just for your life even if you have the whole run of the world."

At the same time as Zhang Xiaobao was speaking, he constantly pulled items from his person to throw at the bandit's feet. The bandit couldn't help following each item with his gaze before looking up to observe what the person in front of him was wearing, the watch on his wrist, his aura, and then looking at the child in his arms. Finally, he hesitantly nodded.

"No, you can't go over there. You have to come back with me." Upon seeing that Zhang Xiaobao really was going to go forward with the exchange, Wang Juan immediately pulled on Zhang Xiaobao's arm.

It was too bad that she was a woman whose strength couldn't compare with Zhang Xiaobao's. So she was dragged along by Zhang Xiaobao to arrive in front of the bandit. The bandit could care less who came as long as the person's status was higher. He released the child, grabbing Zhang Xiaobao's other arm in one go with a triumphant grin on his face.

There were naturally people who came to take the child away to hide in a safe place. The bandit himself feeling that he was the luckiest person, repeated the words he previously yelled to the police outside before telling Zhang Xiaobao: "You have to give me money, too. Otherwise, I won't let you go."

"I'll give your ma the force!"¹⁴ Zhang Xiaobao used the moment that the bandit's attention slackened to pull his arm out of Wang Juan's grasp and instantly pressed down on the thumb that the

bandit was using to hold down on the explosive device. Cursing, he used his other arm to forcefully wrench the bandit's arm until it broke with a 'kacha' sound.

Just when Zhang Xiaobao was about to take further measures, a large wave of pain suddenly spread through his head as his vision darkened and the hand pressing down on the explosive device couldn't help but loosen.

As a boom sounded, Zhang Xiaobao's last thought was that he hadn't eaten that bowl of liangfen while Wang Juan's was wondering if these two were a team after all.

Notes:

[1\]](#) All names will be romanized in the Chinese way with the surname first followed by the given name.

[2\]](#) Xiaobao (小寶) literally means "little treasure" and is usually an endearing pet name for children. It's normally not used for a legal name. There's an extra connotation of "baby" with this name since the modern slang word for baby is made by repeating the character "bao" (寶) twice to make "bao-bao" (寶寶). This situation would be akin to an adult man whose legal name is Baby or Babe.

[3\]](#) The author literally did not specify what city and just used the English capital letters H and T for the city and province.

[4\]](#) Hard qi gong is a form of martial arts discipline that focuses on hardening the body.

5] The Juan in Wang Juan (王鵠) is a character that is used in the names for several species of cuckoos and road runners. If the author intended any significance with the name choice, he likely was referencing the road runner for Wang Juan.

6] “Da Ge” (大哥) is being used as a title of respect and shows personal loyalty on the speaker’s part so I am translating it with some formality, similar to how the term of “Aniki” is used in Japanese or “Orabuni” is used in Korean. Note that this term of address can also be used by minions to address their gang leaders as well as used for addressing the leader of a group of declared brothers commonly seen in wuxia and in the ultimate example, [Liu Bei](#) (劉備) of the [Three Kingdoms](#) period.

7] Xiaobao is literally calling the orphanage director Grandpa with the title of his job attached likely to call attention to the fact that he is Xiaobao’s grandpa not out of familial duty but his job, which emphasizes the magnitude of his benevolence toward Xiaobao.

8] ¥ is the symbol used for China’s currency, the [Chinese yuan](#) (元/圓), which is also abbreviated RMB for “[renmenbi](#)” (人民幣) meaning “the people’s currency.” Note that yuan/元 tends to translate to a generic meaning of dollar or currency in Chinese since the U.S. dollar is referred to as “mei yuan” (美元) and the Euro is the “ou yuan” (歐元) in Chinese.

9] The pinyin of Wang Juan’s nickname is “Ba Wang Hua” (霸王花) and the phrase itself is a slang nickname for female police officers like Wang Juan that describes the hardness and toughness

of their nature. This term shows up as the title of a Hong Kong movie female supercops, the title of which has been translated into English as “[The Inspector Wears Skirts](#).” Because of the mixed feelings such women that don’t fit the traditional feminine stereotype can elicit in Chinese culture, this nickname could be interpreted as either a dig at or a compliment to Wang Juan depending on the interpretation. The nickname itself can also be a pun since the bawang/霸王 part could allude to Wang Juan’s surname, which means king, while hua/花 means flower and refers to her gender. The “Ba Wang” (霸王) part of bawanghua/霸王花, meaning tyrant or hegemon, is also the epithet traditionally assigned to the King of Chu, [Xiang Yu](#) (項羽), who is generally considered one of the greatest warriors in Chinese history. He was infamously hard to take down and when he finally died, it was by his own hand. The river he died by has been immortalized in poetry as having been dyed red by his blood and that of his enemies. This warrior king ultimately lost out to his more cunning rival, [Liu Bang](#), who later went on to found the [Han dynasty](#). “Ba Wang Hua” (霸王花) can also refer to carrion or “[corpse flowers](#),” which emits a rotting flesh odor in order to attract scavenger insects for the purposes of pollination. Example of such flowers include the [Rafflesia arnoldii](#) or the [Dracunculus vulgaris](#), which can both known as stink lilies. Because of all of the above reasons, I am translating this term as “Tyrant Flower.”

[10\]](#) [Liangfen](#) (涼粉) is a Chinese dish that is served cold whose name literally means “chilled (rice) noodles.” However, because of the different types of noodles that can be used in Chinese cuisine as well as the various terms and characters used to differentiate them—for one thing, there is more than one cold noodle dish in Chinese cuisine that exists whose name might have a similar literal meaning—I decided not to go with a literal translation and keep the pinyin.

[11\]](#) Zhang Xiaobao is referring to the lack of official diplomatic ties between China and the Holy See of Vatican City, the breakdown of which you can read more about [here](#).

[12\]](#) The exact term Xiaobao uses here is “Xiongdi” (兄弟), which is literally the combination of the characters used for older and younger brother and it just means “brothers” or “male siblings.” When used as a way to address someone, its meaning is similar to how the words “man,” “buddy,” “dude,” and of course “brother” can be used colloquially in the English vernacular.

[13\]](#) Xiaobao is using “Ge” (哥), which means “Older Brother,” to refer to himself in the third person. I translated it as “Bro” here since it is an abbreviated form of the whole word, “Ge-Ge” (哥哥). Xiaobao likely is trying to emphasize his expertise and knowledge as well as to convey a casual familiarity with his choice of words here.

[14\]](#) Cursing with a comeback reply in Chinese can be pretty nonsensical even for native speakers since an insulting retort mostly involves repeating part of the phrase and then adding a “your ma” or “your dad” or “your little sister” in there. Actually, if you mention any of the other person’s relatives in a disrespectful tone, it’s pretty much an insult. But speaking ill of people’s mothers is a universal favorite. The other tendency is to add a “bi” (逼) in the insults, a tendency that is derived from another phrase that is a crude way of saying idiot and literally means force.

Volume 01

Chapter 1: Cop & Robber In The Previous Life, Family In The Present Life

It was a midsummer afternoon. The people who had just eaten and briefly rested had once again resumed their day's work. The birds as well as the dog and chickens within the courtyard had all either found good places to enjoy the warm sunlight or had sought shelter in the shade.

A group of boys splashed around in the stream by the entrance of Tuqiao¹ Village's Zhang Manor.² After playing for a while or perhaps because the noise of their yells was too loud, a man walked out of the manor's courtyard house door. Glaring at the gang of kids, he unhappily reprimanded them: "All of you scam further away! If my Little Mister³ is woken up, you'll all be getting a beating!"

The kids immediately fell silent, carefully looking toward the open door in the corner of the courtyard house before they submerged into the water to make their way upstream bit by bit.

It was only after the man returned back into the courtyard house that all of the kids exhaled before puckering their faces up into various grimaces at the closed courtyard house door.

"Scared me to death! So harsh! The old patriarch of the Zhang family isn't like him at all." A kid around 7 years old quietly said this as he used his hands to dig out yellow mud from the river bed.

“Isn’t it always like that? The people of the master-family⁴ are easygoing while the steward is stern. But no matter how stern the steward is, he still has to obey the master-family. I heard that the little master can drink porridge now. Let’s catch some toads to send over in a bit. Porridge made with the oil taken from the toad innards is good for the body. That’s how my mom⁵ eats after she had my little sister.” Another one of the kids who was slightly older and more considerate than the previous one stared at the occasional toads swimming by in the water while he spoke to the others.

The kids, knowing that ingratiating themselves to the master-family’s Little Mister at this time would get them an unexpected windfall, all nodded as well. One of the kids who had already caught a toad added: “Then let’s catch some more. The Wang Manor’s little girl is also at the Zhangs. Erzi,⁶ how good would it be if your little sister was with the Zhangs’ Little Mister now—your family would no longer need to worry about food and clothing.”

The one called Erzi was the considerate kid from before. Upon hearing those words, he slightly shook his head: “That’s simply impossible. The village only has these two manors. They’re the example of a perfect match.⁷ Besides, they were born well. It was originally an engagement as babies⁸ and they were even born on the same day with a difference of less than a minute.”

“That’s right. That’s right.” The kid who had first spoken was nodding beside him as he said: “Not only that, I heard that the two babies clung to each other and would cry if separated ever since they met on their full moon⁹ so that’s why they’re together in one place. Counting the days, it’s only a few days shy of their first full

year.”

“Stop talking, stop talking. Let’s quickly catch some toads. As long as the master-family is pleased, they might reward us a few chicken eggs. My mom’s milk is low so they can be given to my little sister in a steamed cake.” Upon thinking of his little sister who was just 4 months old, Erzi didn’t wish to waste any more time and after a quick greeting, left to find a fork.

In one of the rooms within that courtyard house of the Zhang Manor, two babies currently lay side by side, lightly covered by a thin blanket, both of their small faces peaceful as their bellies evenly rose and fell. Seated on a small stool by the doorway of this room was a young maiden¹⁰ of around 13 or 14 years. After glancing over at the sleeping children, she then leaned against the door frame to nod off, going into a light doze after a short while.

After a while, the little boy lying on the right side slowly opened his eyes. At first, he froze before giving way to confusion. Raising his hands and moving his feet, a trace of panic suddenly appeared in his eyes. He then turned his head to look around him as he muttered: “Where is this? How did I turn into a child? Where’s the bandit? What about that Wang Juan?”

When his gaze fell upon the other child by his side, he discovered that it was a little girl. An idea he couldn’t ignore the possibility of arose in his mind then. But before he could make a further judgment, the little girl’s eyelashes twitched a bit. Still holding onto the idea he didn’t dare believe in his head, the boy shut his eyes once again as he feigned sleep.

At this time, the little girl also opened her eyes. Like him, she was uncertain as she surveyed her surroundings and like him, she muttered: “Where is this? How did I turn into a child? Where’s that swindler, Zhang Xiaobao? My mission hasn’t been completed yet.”

Upon hearing her muttered words, the previously even breathing of the little boy at her side suddenly stopped only to immediately resume. But it was that instant that caught the notice of the girl who had been staring at him the entire time.

Keeping her suspicions to herself, the little girl considered the position of the person sitting by the doorway before reaching out with a plump little hand to touch the little boy’s face and ask: “Zhang Xiaobao? Is that you?”

The little boy didn’t react, his breathing still as uniform as before. The little girl gritted her teeth before pinching the little boy’s nose. This time, the little boy woke up to turn his head to look at the little girl, blinking his eyes with more innocent purity than innocence itself.

“Zhang Xiaobao, hurry up and answer me.” The little girl spoke once again in a voice that slurred her words.

The little boy was still the same, blinking his eyes as he made several toneless ‘ah-ah’ sounds with his mouth just like any normal child of this age.

“Could it be that you’re not Zhang Xiaobao?” The little girl really

didn't know how to judge.

“Ha~! Ha~! Ah~! Ah~!” The little boy's toneless voice sounded as he reached out a plump little hand to touch the little girl's face.

The little girl stared into the little boy's eyes to see if there was anything in there that shouldn't appear. But she didn't get even a little bit of a hint. Just when the little girl was about to give up, she suddenly thought of the Commissioner's words: ‘He can jump straight down from a 15 meter height unharmed and can climb up 9 meter high walls bare-handed. He is also adept in criminal psychology, behavioral psychology, social psychology, and other related disciplines. He has been designated as an extremely dangerous criminal.’

“Let you pretend? I'll pinch you to death!” The little girl also raised her hand to straight away pinch the little boy's arm. With one pinch, the little boy immediately started crying with a ‘wah~wah!’ and before the little girl could react, the young maiden that was sitting by the doorway had already rushed over in a run.

Upon seeing someone arrive, the little girl pretended to be just as innocent as the little boy previously was, batting her eyes at the little boy who stared back at her with terror on his face as he kept crying.

“All right, all right. Baolang,^{[11](#)} don't cry. There's no urine, either. Baolang, don't look at the Wang Family's Little Miss^{[12](#)} with that kind of look. This is your future wife. You've always been together since your full moon, how can you be scared like that?” The little

boy finally stopped crying with the young maiden's soothing voice.

Once the young maiden returned to her seat on her stool, the little boy fell back to sleep while the little girl stared at him with a face full of dismay. After thinking for a bit, she finally gritted her teeth and reached out again—this time, for the little boy's lower body—as she whispered: “You know to call for help? Feel you have backup? Not afraid of a pinching? I'll squeeze you till you're sick!”

“Wah~! Wah~!” Without waiting for the little girl's hand to touch him, the little boy started crying again and the little girl promptly retracted her hand. The young maiden came over once again but when she saw that there still was no problem, she returned to her seat.

“Let me see how long you can cry for. I'm going to squeeze again.” The little girl reached out with her hand again.

“Wah~!” The little boy cried.

The little girl withdrew her hand and the little boy stopped. The little girl reached out with her hand and the little boy cried. The two of them kept repeating this cycle.

After a few times, the little girl didn't reach out with her hand this time, only saying: “I'm going to squeeze.”

“Wah~!” The little boy cried.

“I’m not squeezing.” The little girl said.

The little boy stopped.

He did stop but the little boy’s expression had changed now. It was no longer as innocent and pure as before.

“Act, act, keep on acting. You regret it, right? Did you forget to study child psychology back then, my International Swindler, Comrade Zhang Xiaobao?” The little girl laughed this time as she teasingly spoke into the little boy’s ear.

The little boy could no longer keep up the pretense and reaching up with a fat little hand to smack his forehead, he sighed as he said: “It wasn’t me being careless. It’s men who treat this thing with too much care.”

He mentally understood that previously, it had already become reflex. But for children, it wouldn’t even be possible to have this kind of reflex. Faced with such a situation, a child basically only has two reactions. One, keep crying and wait for someone to come comfort them—but he later stopped by himself. Two, switch from crying to laughing with the discovery of something amusing—but he himself was affected by his adult mindset.

“Comrade Wang Juan, I feel that a police officer shouldn’t do this kind of indecent thing. Especially for a policewoman, it really is too unethical for you to be this way.” Zhang Xiaobao finally admitted to his own identity.

“Criminal Swindler, Comrade Zhang Xiaobao, you must remember that there are only bad intentions and that there’s no such thing as unreasonable measures. Tell me, where did you put the money?” Wang Juan did not feel the slightest embarrassment. The training she received was like so.

Zhang Xiaobao glanced at the young maiden who had returned to her seat by the doorway again before turning to say to Wang Juan: “If you must add a description in front of my name, please say Suspect. Right now, I feel that what we need to consider shouldn’t be the issue of the money. Remember that, to me, money is never an issue. What I’m thinking of right now is if I can still eat that bowl of liangfen?”

“You really can find topics for idle chitchat. Where’s the money?” Wang Juan continued asking after the money.

“Have you been a cop until you’ve grown foolish? What money? Look at our current situation. Look at our surroundings. By a normal yet unbelievable logic, we’ve already left our original world and been reincarnated into another world. My dying regret is not being able to eat that bowl of liangfen.” Zhang Xiaobao turned over to look up at the ceiling.

Wang Juan looked at their surroundings again and also discovered that it wasn’t her time period. Or rather, the things in this world such as the appearance of the young maiden sitting by the doorway when she came over and the clothes she wore proved this point.

“It’s all you, it’s all you! You had to go do some hostage exchange.

This is just great. I can't ever see my family again. Pay me back! Pay back my parents! Pay back my brothers and sisters! Pay back my job!" While doing her best to keep her voice low, Wang Juan pinched Zhang Xiaobao's shoulder as she complained.

"You've regretted it? Would it be better that I didn't go over, letting that child continue to live under the constant threat of death then?" Zhang Xiaobao turned his head around again to ask.

"Regret? No, I have no regret. Who am I? I'm the Tyrant Flower of China. Please don't use those kind of eyes to look at me. I will not allow my honor to be smeared." Wang Juan paused for a bit before solemnly speaking to Zhang Xiaobao.

Zhang Xiaobao nodded his head in agreement with Wang Juan's words. He thought for a bit before suddenly saying: "Do you think that in this life I'll be able to see my parents? Looking at how the surroundings are arranged and that person's words just now, this should be an affluent household."

"Ai~!"¹³ Wang Juan sighed as she reasonably spoke: "Let's first not think of that. Think about what kind of place we're in? What should we do from now on?"

"Who cares what place this is? I've decided. I can finally see my parents in this lifetime so I'll work hard to earn money and let them live well. Then, I'll find a wife and let her live well. Although hearing that woman's words before, you seem to be my wife. I've decided..."

“I’ve decided not to accept it. I will not have a life together with a Suspected International Criminal Swindler.” Not waiting for Zhang Xiaobao to finish speaking, Wang Juan directly denied it.

“Forget it. Let’s first not discuss such things. I’m going to sleep. There might be other things to do later on so I won’t keep you company.” Zhang Xiaobao lay back down again as he shut his eyes, the expression on his face one of anticipation.

Notes:

[1\]](#) I am using the pinyin for the village (土橋村) as many real life and historical places will be mentioned in this novel. Since the official names of these places use [pinyin](#), a translated name would not match in tone. The name of the village literally translates to “dirt/earthen bridge village.”

[2\]](#) “Zhuangzi” (莊子) usually describes a farming estate with a mansion-like residential complex attached similar to a castle overlooking its surrounding domain. I chose to translate it as manor because it is similar in setup to an English country estate. However, a “zhuangzi” (莊子) also entails all of the land being farmed by tenant farmers or serfs, making it more of a miniature village that can be self-contained, giving its owner a certain amount of status as a form of landed gentry.

[3\]](#) “Xiao Gongzi” (小公子) is used here. Gongzi has its etymological origins as a manner of address for the son of a duke (Gong/公), which then broadened in usage to apply to any young man of status with the evolution of Chinese proto-feudalism into the Imperial system. I am using “Mister” to translate Gongzi since the use of Mister was similarly only applicable to gentlemen in Europe

before it became a polite title of address for any man. Note though that this is different in connotation from the “Mister” that “Xiansheng” (先生) is usually translated as. Xiansheng/先生 replaced gongzi/公子 as the universal appellation for men in modern polite speech but in ancient China, it was the way to address teachers and scholars (hence, why it was imported into Japanese as sensei). Because it is different from the other terms that could possibly be used in this context such as “young master” (shaoye/少爺) or “little master” (xiao zhuzi/小主子) and is being used as a title, I am translating “xiao gongzi” as “Little Mister.”

4] “Zhu Jia” (主家) literally means “master family” and can be used by servants to refer to their boss. There is a connotation of ownership, emphasizing their status as landlord or superiority over the households attached to them as tenant farmers or serfs.

5] “Niang” (娘) is an informal way to address mothers in historical China. Mama (媽媽) as a term existed back then but it was primarily used to address older (usually young to middle-aged) married female servants and hadn’t broadened in its usage to become a casual form of mother yet. So whenever something is translated as “Ma,” it’ll be because the speaker literally made the sound, Ma. On a slightly disturbing note, using Mama as a form of maternal address probably started a lot earlier with prostitutes addressing their procuress as such than with the general populace.

6] “Erzi” (二子) literally combines the characters for “two” and “child/son” so it can be inferred that he is the second child or son of his household depending on whether the family separates the birth order of the children by gender or counts them all together regardless of sex.

7] The idiom “men dang hu dui” (門當戶對) has the literal meaning of “matching doors, paired households.” Social status was so regulated in ancient China that there were even strict laws governing residences including their doors and how high or wide they could be based on the status of the household. This was because the Chinese greatly believed in the symbolism found in architecture such as with fengshui (風水) so the thought was that doors or gates was the face of the house. Thus, like the Western nouveau riche, ancient Chinese merchants who gained enough wealth could and did build grandiose mansions or estates but they could not “get above themselves” by erecting a similarly grand gate for fear of punishment. The only way to be allowed to have that “face” was to raise their household’s status altogether by having a man of the main household pass the civil exams to gain a scholarly title and/or governmental position. In some eras, if buying a title was possible, that would be an option too. Since marriage in those days were considered more of a political alliance between clans/families even among the peasantry since it added to their existing social network, a marriage partner that was equal in status was a very important consideration before an engagement was even considered.

8] The thinking that an ideal marriage partner was chosen from a household that was a peer made it logical for the custom of engagement from birth or childhood to arise. Households whose members got along well with each other would oftentimes promise their children to each other. Some took it as far as to promise their children to each other while still in the womb as husband and wife, making the provision that if they were not of different gender, then they would be like brothers or sisters to each other instead.

9] One of the significant baby milestones in China is the full moon or month. Since infant mortality was so high, celebrating

the baby's birth after it had survived a significant milestone like a month was the custom. Some regions celebrated 100 days instead. The Chinese used the lunar calendar so a full moon was actually also a full month.

[10\]](#) “Gu Niang” (姑娘) is the Chinese equivalent of the French “mademoiselle” although it is a rather dated term so I’m translating “xiao gu niang” as young maiden. Depending on the era, “gu niang” was used as a descriptor rather than a polite title. Some regions and later eras used this as a form of address for the young lady of a rich household leading to a modified form of address for her once she wed such as “Gu Nai Nai” (姑奶奶) and a title that only her household would use to address her husband by, “Gu Ye” (姑爺).

[11\]](#) “Baolang” (寶郎) is a nickname formed by taking the “bao” (寶) from Zhang Xiaobao’s name and combining it with “lang” (郎) which just means boy or man. It is similar to when a man named Thomas is called “Tommy Boy” as a nickname. On an interesting side note, the character of “lang” forms the basis of the common Japanese male name suffix “Taro” (太郎) and is why a lot of old school Japanese names for men had -taro at the end like the -son suffix to some English surnames.

[12\]](#) “Xiao Niangzi” (小娘子) is the respectful way this novel and time period addresses young ladies from affluent households. Later on in history, it broadened in usage to be a polite way to address any young woman. However, it has now become dated in modern times although similar terms related to it are still in use. This is likely because “niangzi” (娘子) can also mean bride or wife.

[13\]](#) “Ai” (哎) is the sound in Chinese for a sigh.

Chapter 2: Not Alone As A Solitary Person

Speaking of sleep, Zhang Xiaobao really did go to sleep. To the side though, Wang Juan was not in the mood as she thought of her home, thought of her parents and her family. She suddenly felt a little lonely as if the entire world had left her, leaving only her by herself. Only when she vividly felt that there was a person beside her did she feel as if there was still just a little bit of warmth left.

‘If I was given another chance to choose, would I choose to go with him to trade for that hostage? No, I must take responsibility for my personal honor. Even if I had to choose again, I’d still have no regret, no complaints. It’s just as well that it’s not just me here. There’s still a swindler with me. Damned swindler, didn’t dig even one single cent out.’

Wang Juan slowly thought as she gazed at the little gray canopy hanging as it swayed in the gentle breeze.

“Are you still thinking about the matter of the money?” At this time, Zhang Xiaobao who was supposed to be asleep suddenly turned his head to quietly ask.

“How did you know?” Wang Juan was surprised.

“Your type of people I’ve seen a lot of—if the mission isn’t completed, you’d feel there was something missing. Relax. When I returned back to China, I already thought it through. On my person, I carried an item. Inside, there’s an account number. In it is 10 million U.S. dollars that I left for you guys as a fee. Your

commissioner is not bad as a person. His only shortcoming is that he has little money and his equipment is a lot worse than others. He's like this and he still wants to break cases?

Don't worry that the explosion will blast the thing apart. I think that even if it was blasted into smithereens, there still would be a related department that can extract what was inside. As for the rest of the money, it'll be invested into the homeland later, too. Don't think about all of that. It's no use. Since we're living another life, then let us live a little better."

Zhang Xiaobao continued in his persuasion as well as explained the matter of the money. Wang Juan naturally wouldn't be so silly as to not understand these words. Displaying her little arms on the outside of the blanket, she slowly nodded her head as she asked: "Could it be that you have nothing that you regret?"

"I do. That in the end, I wasn't able to eat that bowl of liangfen." Zhang Xiaobao's mouth split into a grin.

"Don't say that to me. You know what I'm asking." Wang Juan put on a frosty look. Only, no matter what facial expression she made, her childish face made it cute.

Zhang Xiaobao smiled again: "Don't use that look for criminal interrogations with me. Here, I'm a good citizen. In the past, if someone asked me in this manner, I definitely would not show them a good attitude. Today, I'll make an exception and I will never mention it ever again.

Actually, my biggest regret is that I've never seen my parents. After that flood, I left that place of sad trauma, stealing on the road while I rummaged through the trash for food that others didn't want to eat. I generally came out at night and found a corner to nestle in during the day. It wasn't that the night was good, it was that I was scared of the daylight.

Before, I still had Grandpa Director. But after Grandpa Director died, I was alone. I only then realized that I was an orphan. During the day, I would always see a few adults holding the hands of children as they went to play and to eat. My only feeling would be envy. When those children that were just as old as me made a fuss with their parents, I would want to hit them. If it were me, I would definitely obediently listen to them.

But I knew if I did actually run over to hit them, their parents would beat me to death and yet I had no parents to come and protect me. Later, I saw them go to school and I wanted to go, too. You should know, that basically was impossible. Not unless I returned once again to that icy cold orphanage.”

“Then?” Wang Juan asked immediately after. She really didn't know that the most vulnerable spot in Zhang Xiaobao's heart was this. As she listened, she couldn't help feeling a bit sad.

“Then? Then, you all know about it. To learn stuff, I entered prison, stole, trained, and went back in again. Here, I'd like to thank our police system. As long as you're willing to spend money, you can create identity cards and records just like the real deal. So I don't have a criminal record and could even buy a gun. Too bad I only ever used it once. It was a robbery where I robbed an official

of his money.

It's funny speaking of it. That official just got 300,000 from another person and hadn't even gotten it warmed up before I robbed it. It shouldn't be on your records. I already knew that he wouldn't dare call the police. Later on, I went back to his house and stole quite a bit of money. He still didn't report it to the police. Because I saw in his notebook that he killed someone before. By the time we came here, he should have arrived at the main headquarters.

If the one we encountered being held hostage before we arrived was him, I think you wouldn't have needed to get dragged into this. I would have provoked that bandit into releasing his grip."

"You, that is breaking the law. Your thinking itself is wrong." Hearing that Zhang Xiaobao actually had this type of criminal tendency, Wang Juan immediately corrected him.

"Give me a break. Breaking the law? You don't think these words are hypocritical? We're all not little children anymore. Are you not clear on what the world is like? Could it be that you studied command until you went silly?" Zhang Xiaobao stared at Wang Juan with a look in his eyes that made her very uncomfortable.

"All right, let's not talk about this. I want to know why you know so many details about me." Wang Juan didn't refute him and only asked the question she had in her mind.

"You came over to capture me. Of course, I'd want to know you a

bit better. This has nothing to do with me. If you need to ask, ask your own people. A fly can't attack an uncracked egg.”¹

“All right, let's not talk about this, either. I find that you have a kind of radical rebellious feeling against our nation's society.” Wang Juan felt that she had no way of gaining the upper hand in this debate so she wanted to change the topic.

Zhang Xiaobao didn't agree though and continued speaking: “I have never rebelled. I'm just complaining. I've never hated. Even when I found out in my later investigations that my biological parents were crushed under a coal mine and because I was only an infant, the compensation money was embezzled, I didn't hate then, either. Because I had Grandpa Director. He also held my hand to go eat liangfen. He even left behind for me the hope to keep on living. From then on, I knew that this world didn't just have darkness and hatred but also warmth and love.”

“You, what kind of person are you?” Wang Juan had no way of reasonably pinpointing Zhang Xiaobao at this time.

“The same as you, someone who has resolve in their heart that is also full of contradiction. This is ideals versus life. No more talking. I hear the sound of footsteps outside. I hope that arriving will be my family.” Zhang Xiaobao suddenly turned his head as he spoke to look toward the doorway and at that young maiden who was still nodding off.

“How come I don't hear it?” Wang Juan asked with even greater doubt.

“That’s why you guys couldn’t even catch me.” After answering with a sentence, Zhang Xiaobao stared without blinking at the door site.

“Yingtao,² you’re slacking off again. I see that your skin is itching.”³ After Wang Juan heard the footsteps, a voice rose in rebuke.

“No, no, Mistress. I didn’t slack off. Little Mister and Little Miss are sleeping.” The maiden fearfully stood up with a lowered head as she explained.

At this time, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both saw a woman under the age of 20 wearing a pink-dyed sash and green clothing standing in the doorway. Perhaps this woman really didn’t want to punish the maiden or maybe she saw that the two children were looking over with wide eyes but she changed in expression from before. Smiling, she briskly walked over in front of the couch as she fondly gazed at Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao. That smile had no hint of pretense.

“Mom?” Zhang Xiaobao reacted first as he tentatively asked.

There was mayhem now. The woman grabbed Zhang Xiaobao into a hug at once, excitedly asking the maiden behind her: “My Baolang can say Mom. Yingtao, did you hear?”

“I heard, I heard. Congratulations, Mistress. Little Mister can say

Mom.” Yingtao busied herself in agreement. She could finally not need to worry about being punished. This one word of Mom from Little Mister could pardon even a capital crime, not to mention the one of dozing off.

“Mom!” Seeing that it really was his biological mother he had encountered, Zhang Xiaobao excitedly used his fat little hands to touch the woman’s face before kissing her as he yelled out Mom again.

“Ai~! Xiaobao, it’s Mom. My Xiaobao is so thoughtful. Yingtao, go to the accounting room to get your reward.” Seeing her son like this, any anger the woman had completely disappeared. To let others be happy along with her, Yingtao who had just been reprimanded could now be rewarded.

As she spoke, she took out a string of items from inside her sleeve and detached a small wooden piece from it to throw towards Yingtao. Yingtao hastily caught it and upon looking at the wooden piece, was even happier. This wooden piece could be used to exchange for a knife⁴ of pork meat that was enough for her family to eat well for several days. Carefully hiding it away in her chest, she did not leave but stood to the side, waiting for any other orders.

“Mom~!” Zhang Xiaobao energetically kissed the woman again. He originally wanted to say even more words to make his mother happy but he remembered his own age so he could only keep repeating the word Mom.

Seeing such a scene, Wang Juan didn’t know why but the big eyes

under those long eyelashes were suddenly brimming full with tears. And not knowing if it was out of pity for the experience of Zhang Xiaobao's previous life or if she had been touched, she couldn't help calling out: "Mom [in-law]." ⁵

After speaking the two words with a bit of distortion because of the air whistling through her teeth, Wang Juan finally came to her senses. How could she let herself be affected? At this moment, her mental defenses were actually not up.

Seeing how cooperative Wang Juan was being, Zhang Xiaobao wanted to follow up with a 'Wife~' to amuse his mother. But upon seeing the obvious look of regret on Wang Juan's face, he could only keep his own mouth shut. He was afraid that once he finished speaking, Wang Juan would reply to him with a 'Scram.' There would be trouble then.

The woman had no presence of mind to see the exchange of looks between the two children at this time. Her son could say Mom and her future daughter-in-law could call Mom [in-law] now, too. Two children who originally couldn't talk and in the blink of an eye were actually so smart—it excited her to the point where she didn't know what was better to do. So taking out another wooden piece on which 'sheep' was written, she readily threw it to Yingtao.

"Take this to trade for a sheep leg. Go to the accounting room yourself to get it. What did you hear just then?"

"In reply to Mistress, I heard it. Congratulations, Mistress. Felicitations, Mistress. Little Mister can say Mom. The Wang Family's Little Miss can even say Mom [in-law]. With Mistress'

arrival, the two children have grown smarter.” Yingtao knew that she was a special attendant to the two children. The more the children pleased the adults, the greater her reward would be. She didn’t think that the two babies who had never spoken before would suddenly become so intelligent. Trembling as she took the wooden piece, she thought of using the sheep leg to trade for some cloth that could be used to make new clothing for her parents and younger brother.

“Come. Mom will take you out to play. Let them see our family’s Baolang and Juan-Juan.⁶ No family’s children are as good as my family’s. Today, that group of mischievous children even sent over some toads. Mom already had them use what was inside to be simmered in a porridge to let you two little guys have a taste. Mom awarded everyone 20 chicken eggs.”

The woman used one hand to hold Zhang Xiaobao and the other to scoop up Wang Juan, smiling while she spoke as she walked outside.

Seeing how this lifetime’s mother had consecutively awarded the maid servant twice and even used a large amount of chicken eggs as a reward, Zhang Xiaobao could finally experience the status that a child had in a mother’s heart at this moment. He nestled closely into his mother’s embrace, forgetting about his own mental age as he reached out with his little hand to dab Wang Juan’s delicate nose. He didn’t even feel any pain when he got bitten. There was basically no strength with such few amount of teeth.

1] The idiom “cangying bu ding wu feng de dan” (蒼蠅不叮無縫的蛋) illustrates how if an egg didn’t have a crack or vulnerability in its otherwise impervious shell, the fly wouldn’t be able to get at the insides. The metaphor is similar to the one used for the English adage, “where there’s smoke, there’s a fire.” They both suggest that a symptom such as a fly or smoke wouldn’t be present if there wasn’t a cause such as a crack in the eggshell or a fire.

2] “Yingtao” (櫻桃) means cherry.

3] The original text literally said her skin is tight, which is just a colloquialism to say that her skin is itchy and asking for a beating.

4] The measurement used here is literally “one knife” (一刀) for one slice. Its exact amount can vary as it was never a standardized unit of measurement. Since it’s mentioned in a traditional saying that states that upon reaching the age of 66, one should eat a gift of “a knife of meat” (一刀肉) from one’s daughters as a sign of good health and a long life, one knife is mostly likely 6.6 [catty](#) in order to match the auspiciousness of the number 6.

5] “Po Po” (婆婆) is the informal title of address for a mother-in-law. The formal one is “yue mu” (岳母). As there isn’t an English equivalent for a casual form of mother-in-law other than just Mom, which would only make it confusing as to why Wang Juan saying this is significant, I added in-law in an aside to differentiate from when Zhang Xiaobao is calling his mother Mom.

6] Because Chinese is a language that tends to repeat syllables in

order to make them sound cute or casual, Wang Juan's pet name is naturally Juan-Juan in a process similar to how adding a -y or -ie at the end of names in English can create nicknames such as Johnny, Timmy, Tommy, Kimmy, Kitty, etc. It can also be likened to the process in which a syllable in some names can be taken out and repeated such as with names like Lulu, Cee-cee, Kiki, Vivi, Gigi, etc.

Chapter 3: The Tang Dynasty Era Is Kaiyuan

The woman hugged her own son and future daughter-in-law, almost floating as she walked out. This time, Zhang Xiaobao didn't continue wallowing in the warmth of having a mother in this lifetime. He kept communicating through trading looks with Wang Juan and the occasional use of lip speech.¹ His meaning was to have Wang Juan coordinate with him to figure out as quickly as possible what their current location was like.

Wang Juan still had some internal conflict and temporarily could not adapt to her new identity. She was even more unused to being carried around the place by a young woman. Seeing the message that Zhang Xiaobao transmitted, she suppressed all of her inner emotions to start observing the surrounding scenery including the apparel that people were wearing and how the rooms were decorated.

The two of them could be said to be of the elite in their previous lifetime. In this moment, they unleashed all of the expertise, knowledge, and experience that they had accumulated.

“Ancient time?” While being carried in his mother's arms outside, Zhang Xiaobao mouthed the words to Wang Juan.

Wang Juan nodded slightly. Her eyes sweeping the table, she discovered two coins on top. She squinted her eyes as she took a closer look before replying: “If my guess is not wrong, it should be Tang dynasty. I saw some money—Kaiyuan Tongbao.² Don't know which reign it is.”

At this time, the woman had already exited the door. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan started sizing up the outside circumstances too and discovered that they actually weren't directly looking outside but that there was a courtyard entrance quad³ in front of them.

"A wealthy family? Manor lord? Official's family? Merchant?" Upon seeing this situation, Wang Juan immediately gave her speculation.

"Not the family of an official. My ma—my mom⁴ doesn't have that sort of air around her. Listening to what my mom just said, my initial conclusion is landlord class with peasants."⁵ Zhang Xiaobao answered after some analysis.

"Mistress, how could a single you [honorific]⁶ carry two? Quickly, let me carry one of them." Just as Wang Juan was about to reply, a man's voice sounded. She had assumed it was this woman's husband. But then she saw that it was a 40-something year old uncle wearing silk clothing. Although calculating based on her current age, she should perhaps call this person a grandpa. As he walked over, she immediately shut her mouth, resuming the semblance of an innocent child.

Here, Zhang Xiaobao was also the same as he used a curious gaze to look at this person, focusing especially on their eyes, intent to see if there was any deception or anything else suppressed within toward his mother. The position he assigned this person was a steward. According to his temperament, if he saw any hint of

disrespect toward his mother in this possible steward's eyes, then he was going to kill someone.

“No harm. The two children aren't heavy. Carrying them is pleasant, even. Steward Zhang should go busy yourself. Oh, and reward all of the people in the courtyard house today with an extra helping of meat at dinner time tonight.” Upon mentioning the children, the woman could not stop smiling and naturally wanted all of the people inside the courtyard house to be happy with her as well.

“Yes, Mistress. You must be busy. I'll go fetch someone to look after you. The weather's hot so they can hold up an umbrella for Little Mister and Little Miss.” Steward Zhang respectfully replied before quietly walking away with his head bowed not revealing a hint of disrespect, not even knowing that this attitude saved him from the calamity of a death by murder.

The woman continued walking ahead while carrying the two children. Before even reaching the courtyard house in front, another maiden of a similarly young age came over to hold up an umbrella to block that scorching sunlight. At this time, Yingtao also presented a moistened silk handkerchief for Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan to use to lightly wipe their faces with.

“Shiliu,⁷ do you know where the Master is?” The woman kissed Zhang Xiaobao's face as she asked the maiden holding up the umbrella.

“In reply to Mistress' words, Master is currently in the study

reviewing the books. Around this time, Old Madam⁸ and Old Master should be under the shade of the tree in the forecourt.” Shiliu cleverly replied. With her service experience, she naturally understood the Mistress’ intentions and that was to let the family members see the children.

The woman nodded her head: “Unh, then let’s go to the forecourt. Yingtao, after a bit, tell the people renovating the courtyard house in the back not to slack off. After the repairs are complete, let Old Madam and Old Master return to living there. It gives off a bad appearance for ones of their status to keep living up in front.”

After turning her head to once again look at the two children in her embrace, her face immediately transformed into a smiling one. Slightly leaning to the side, she said: “Xiaobao, Juan-Juan, the one from just before was the steward of our manor. This maid servant is called Yingtao. The other one is called Shiliu. In a bit, we’ll have you see your Grandpa and Grandma.”

Then, without minding if the children could understand, she continued talking while walking in order to teach the two children how to speak. This is called a house and the center area of the house is the door and windows and so on and so forth. Up until reaching the forecourt where they saw two ‘elderly people’ that weren’t even 50 yet who were sitting at the stone table under the large pagoda tree⁹ did she stop speaking and quickly took two steps forward.

“Qiao-er¹⁰ came by? Quick, let me, this old lady, see our good grandson and granddaughter-in-law.” The old lady being waited

upon as she sat there drinking tea immediately stood up in welcome once she saw the woman. Speaking while reaching out a hand to take over Zhang Xiaobao, she even griped: “Qiao-er, carrying two children in such hot weather, what if you get exhausted? Let the servants do it next time.”

Though she said this, she herself didn’t even show any intention of letting the servants help her carry the children. Holding onto Zhang Xiaobao with two hands in front of her to stare at him, however much she looked, she couldn’t look enough. The wrinkles at the corners of her eyes crinkled together as the smile on her face wouldn’t diminish.

“I’m not tired. How could I get tired from carrying my own child? Oh, right. Dad [in-law],¹¹ Mom [in-law], Baolang is able to call Mom. He said it just now in the room. Also, Juan-Juan, she called me Mom [in-law], too. Come, Baolang, call me again.” Mother Zhang¹² recalled this as she spoke and wanting to let her mother-in-law and father-in-law to be happy together, she reached out to stroke her son’s plump fat face as she bade him to talk.

“Mom.” Of course, Zhang Xiaobao wouldn’t refuse. He could finally enjoy having parents in this lifetime, prepared to say all of the words that he previously couldn’t say. Not waiting for praise from the others, he said to the old lady hugging him: “Grandma.”

Then turning his head toward the old man who was sitting there and looking over here, he continued to call: “Grandpa.”

At this moment, the old man could no longer sit still, either. In

one bounce, he stood up to quickly walk in front of his grandson: “Aiyou,¹³ my good grandson! Let Grandpa see you. Good, better than the grandsons of others. No other family can compare to our family. Call me again for Grandpa¹⁴ to hear.”

“Grandpa.” Zhang Xiaobao closely scrutinized his grandfather and thought to himself that if he encountered a flood that he was washed away by again, this grandfather would probably be able to pull him up onto land, too.

“Grandpa, Grandma.” Wang Juan followed in greeting at this time too. When meeting the elderly, there should be fundamental respect.

This speech from the both of them at once caused everybody to be happy. The old lady took Wang Juan while the old man hugged Zhang Xiaobao as they sat together. The praises being spouted from their mouths were never-ending as they praised their son, praised their daughter-in-law, praised their future granddaughter-in-law, and even all of the servants waiting on them were praised too as if everything was wonderfully good.

The weather no longer felt hot and they no longer felt so bogged down. Even the guard dog that was normally not allowed to come near was able to lie down under the tree with them to be praised, too.

At this time, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan enjoyed the tender atmosphere on the one hand while listening closely to their conversation and observing the surroundings on the other so they

could evaluate what their later living conditions would be like.

It was especially after hearing his grandfather, grandmother, and mother discuss some trivial family matters that the two of them listened with even closer care while not stopping with their lip speech.

“Who said your family’s not officials? Don’t you have a fief? There’s even 100 heads of shiyi.”¹⁵ Wang Juan said this to Zhang Xiaobao upon hearing Zhang Xiaobao’s Grandpa speak of his worry that the awarded grant of land that his forefather risked their life to earn would be confiscated.

Zhang Xiaobao listened along, too. His own forefather went to war, had military exploits, and was granted an honorary title as well as gaining several hundred [mu](#) [acre]¹⁶ of land. Later on, that forefather died and the honorary title was lost but the land and the 100 heads didn’t get taken back. Now that the regnal era¹⁷ had changed—that is, the emperor had changed—there was the fear that the land would be taken back.

“There’s been so many years between now and Forefather’s time, the family hasn’t been officials for ages. Besides, it was only honorary before. This isn’t important though. What’s important is that we know the time period—the 2nd year of Kaiyuan.¹⁸ Looks like we can be stable for several decades. Li Longji¹⁹ just took care of his aunt²⁰ and is currently in the rapid development stage.” Zhang Xiaobao learned of this most important piece of information from the mouth of his Grandpa.

Things are easier to handle with intelligence. People don't fear facing danger or difficulty but they fear facing the unknown. Being blind in the dark was the most uncomfortable.

“Good, what's good? Why not a bit earlier like the Zhenguan²¹ era? At least we wouldn't need to worry about the Anshi Rebellion.²² I reckon that your family's land can't be saved. It should have been taken back ages ago. It's not like it's hereditary. Don't even know what kind of methods were used to hide it for so many years.” Though Wang Juan's mouth was full of sarcasm, in her heart, she was worried, too. If Zhang Xiaobao's family's land was lost, then their revenue would decrease. If something like a disaster happened, without enough food, life would not be good.

However, Zhang Xiaobao was not anxious about this. Big deal whether it was taken back or not—he could just make money and buy more land. It wasn't like making money was hard. Even if he didn't run scams and so couldn't make a large fortune, he could still easily make a small fortune. The only worry of his was the Anshi Rebellion that Wang Juan mentioned. Thinking for a bit, he said to Wang Juan: “No fear. Saving a person isn't easy but isn't doing away with a person even easier?”

“Kill An Lushan?” Wang Juan asked.

“Unh, that's one of them. Right now, it's not urgent. Wait until we've grown up a bit, then we'll do away with An Lushan, kill off Shi Siming,²³ waste Li Linfu,²⁴ and exterminate Yang Guozhong.”²⁵ Zhang Xiaobao said with certainty.

“Keep blowing.²⁶ Even if you really kill An Lushan, there would still be a Li Lushan, Wang Lushan.” Wang Juan didn’t give Zhang Xiaobao any face whatsoever.

Zhang Xiaobao carelessly rolled his eyes as he said: “Theoretically, there would be this type of situation but those who actually change history are people. One of the deciding factors in history is an important person’s character. There’s only one Napoleon. Let’s not debate this question for now. Let’s see when the time comes and then, we’ll know.”

Wang Juan also knew about these matters that touched upon philosophy and didn’t have any conclusions at this time. So deciding to prioritize being realistic, she asked: “Then, what do we do? Just wait until we grow up bit by bit?”

“Of course not. Our primary mission is to make money and then buy more land. The golden age of Kaiyuan is an economic boom—though no matter how prosperous it is, it still can’t compare to our time. Food supply has an indispensable status in our time then, not to mention here.” Zhang Xiaobao gave his thinking.

“How do we do it? Just based on us two little brats?²⁷ Will anyone listen to us?”

“Foolish people consider difficulty. Smart people consider opportunities. Wait until we can get a grasp of the circumstances for 2 days and then I’ll tell you how.” Zhang Xiaobao took on an appearance like he had it in the bag.

Notes:

[1\]](#) The author uses “chun yu” (唇語) to describe what Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan are doing, which literally translates to “lip speech.” It implies that they are speaking by mouthing the words silently to each other and then reading each other’s lips to understand what they are saying.

[2\]](#) A coin that was so named because of the phrase “Kaiyuan Tongbao” (開元通寶) that was inscribed on it that literally meant “inaugural treasure pass” to show that it was universal currency issued in the inaugural year. This was coinage that was issued when an emperor first took the throne and a tradition that started during the Tang dynasty, after which various editions were released later on under the reigns of different emperors. Read more [here](#).

[3\]](#) What’s used here is “yi jing yuan zi” (一進院子) which literally means “one entry courtyard.” It refers to the basic component of Chinese architecture, which is a quad, the most well known example of which is the “[siheyuan](#)” (四合院) or more literally, the “four union courtyard.” These residences were composed of multiple rooms or buildings enclosing a courtyard quad and were categorized by how many courtyards they were made up of similar to how apartment and house listings will sort by how many bedrooms they have. The simplest layout was a single entry courtyard which looked like a rectangle or the character for “mouth” (口). A double entry courtyard looked like the character for “day” (日) while a triple entry one resembled the character for “eye” (目). Each entry point also served to act as a checkpoint, symbolizing that the greater the house, the more gates you had to pass through to get at the innermost part of the house. Also, the higher in status and more respected a person was, the better the

location of their rooms or building complex was with the eldest and most senior members of the household usually living in the north and thus the best rooms in the back.

4] Zhang Xiaobao uses the modern word for mom, “ma” (媽), before catching it and correcting himself by using the ancient word for mom, “niang” (娘).

5] I use peasants as the translation for “zhuang hu” (莊戶) as they are tenant farmers attached to the manor but the type of contracts that they would have with the landlord varied so calling them “serfs” or “slaves” would not be inclusive of the free households that were not in such a situation.

6] The “you” (nin/您) that is used here is an honorific and respectful in tone so its usage is noted in an in-text aside.

7] “Shiliu” (石榴) means pomegranate.

8] I translated “Lao Tai Tai” (老太太) as “Old Madam” since I used “Mistress” as the translation for “fu ren” (夫人). It can also be used as a generic description for an elderly woman in which case, I translated it as old lady.

9] The scientific name for the “huai shu” (槐樹) is the [Styphnolobium japonicum](#) or *Sophora japonica*, which is otherwise known as the Japanese pagoda tree or Chinese scholar tree and is a species native to China.

[10\]](#) “Qiao-er” (巧兒) means “clever child.”

[11\]](#) “Gong Gong” (公公) is the casual way for a married woman to address her father-in-law. The formal title is “yue fu” (岳父). Because this “Dad” is not the term used by children when addressing their biological fathers and only used by daughter-in-laws, I note it in a text aside to point out the difference.

[12\]](#) “Zhang Mu” (張母) is just a descriptor and not actually a title. The author uses it to serve as an abbreviated way to say Zhang Xiaobao’s mother so please don’t get confused by it.

[13\]](#) “Aiyou” (哎呦) is a common exclamatory sound made in Chinese, usually to show surprise or pain. You will see this quite often.

[14\]](#) Another common trait in Chinese (and other Asian languages) is the tendency to use the third person to refer to oneself by addressing oneself by a title others would use. In this case, Zhang Xiaobao’s grandfather is using “Grandpa” in place of “I.” Because this can inject nuance and information into a conversation, I ended up translating it as is despite the possible awkwardness it can have for a native English reader. It’s a behavior known as [illeism](#).

[15\]](#) “Shiyi” (食邑), which literally means “food territory,” granted the revenue tax of a set number of households or heads as a form of salary. It could be considered a tax break or a monetary grant for the one being awarded the shiyi without the emperor needing to dispense money out of the treasury. It normally came attached with a land grant as well for the number of households in question.

[16\]](#) The equivalent of the Chinese acre, the measurement of a “[mu](#)” (畝) varied depending on the time period and historically ranged anywhere from 615 to over 700 square meters or from over 725 to a little under 800 square yards. By contrast, an acre is roughly 4046 square meters. Though it is not not even close to equivalent to an acre, acre will be noted next to it as a reminder to readers of the role it plays in land area measurement.

[17\]](#) Official calendars in ancient China were divided based on the reign of the individual emperors as well as the political dynasty similarly to how decades can be referred to as divisions of the current century in the Western calendar like with the seventies, eighties, nineties, etc. or by the different presidencies and their administrations with American history. Changing the name of the regnal era was one of the first symbolic decisions a new emperor could make. Some emperors changed the regnal era name more than once to show a significant change or milestone.

[18\]](#) [Kaiyuan](#) (開元) is the name of the second regnal era name of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (唐玄宗), the meaning of which is inaugural.

[19\]](#) Li Longji (李隆基) is the personal name of Emperor Xuanzong. It is extremely heretical of Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao to just state the emperor's name like this so this action betrays their modern sensibilities. They luckily have enough sense to only do this while using lip speech with each other.

[20\]](#) Zhang Xiaobao is making an offhand reference to Xuanzong's disposal of his paternal aunt, [Princess Taiping](#) (太平公主), who was

exceedingly influential as a consequence of the rule of [Wu Zetian](#) (武則天), Taiping's mother and Xuanzong's paternal grandmother, the only Empress Regnant in all of Chinese history.

[21\]](#) “Zhenguan” (貞觀) is the regnal era name for the rule of Emperor [Taizong](#) of Tang (唐太宗) whose rule was so well-regarded as a golden age that it was considered the subject of necessary study for future crown princes.

[22\]](#) The Anshi Rebellion (安史之亂) is a rebellion started by Xuanzong's favored general, An Lushan (安祿山), which was significant for the chaos it caused as a consequence of it that spanned the reigns of three Tang emperors before it was finally suppressed. Its eruption greatly weakened the power of the Tang dynasty leading to its ultimate downfall.

[23\]](#) [Shi Siming](#) (史思明) was An Lushan's friend from childhood who aided him in the Anshi Rebellion.

[24\]](#) [Li Linfu](#) (李林甫) served as chancellor during Xuanzong's reign and was better skilled at flattery to keep himself in Xuanzong's favor and political games to do away with his rivals than the actual administration involved with his job, creating a situation where the Tang dynasty ended up having too few skilled officials to deal with crises like the Anshi Rebellion.

[25\]](#) [Yang Guozhong](#) (楊國忠) was the cousin of Xuanzong's favored concubine, [Consort Yang](#), she whose beauty shamed flowers as a member of the [Four Beauties](#) of ancient China. He became chancellor for Xuanzong through nepotism and was very trusted by him for the same reasons but he was also very incompetent as

chancellor, making worse the situation with the Anshi Rebellion.

[26](#)] The “blowing” (吹) that Wang Juan uses here is a shorthand for the Chinese idiom, “chui niu” (吹牛) which means to brag or to boast and literally translates to “blow bull.”

[27](#)] Wang Juan self-deprecatingly refers to themselves as “xiao pi hai” (小屁孩), which literally means “little butt child.” The way children were reared in ancient China, kids could go around naked (and did, especially in the rural villages) without the same repercussions as adults though the nudity obviously still made them not fit for company. So kids who were prone to leaving their butts hanging out usually evoke a mischievous or naive image so I have translated the term as brats.

Chapter 4: Strengthening And Building The Body As One

It was another noon day. The great big sun up in the sky baked the tree leaves until they were slightly curled. The originally rambunctious dog had long moved to the shade under the tree as he hung out his tongue while looking at the chicken digging at the ground in front of him. The children of the manor got a taste of the sweet rewards yesterday so they impaled the toads with even more vigor today.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan who had just had milk also couldn't bear the fatigue of a young body and lay down to sleep side by side. Yingtao was, as usual, seated on her stool by the doorway nodding off. Mrs. Zhang-Wang¹—or rather Qiao-er, Zhang Xiaobao's mother—busied herself with the matters of the manor.

The steward strolled about, taking a moment to look in the front to see if there was anything that could affect the Little Mister's sleep and in another moment going to the back again to where they were renovating the courtyard house to tell them to hurry while at the same time not to make too much noise.

After sleeping for 2 hours, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan nearly simultaneously woke up. They opened their eyes to look around and after some discussion, prepared to exercise their bodies by first learning how to walk. Maybe it was due to them always being carried by people but they still hadn't learned how to walk yet.

I can't believe that your dad [modern]² is actually a bookworm." Wang Juan jokingly said as she prodded Zhang Xiaobao.

"A bookworm is good, too. As long as I can see him and know that that's my dad [modern] is fine. Yesterday, he actually spoke of the Analects³ to me. How would I know all that?" Zhang Xiaobao recollected the appearance of his father that he saw yesterday. It wasn't false that his father was a bookworm but upon hearing his son say Dad, he still became happy like any other ordinary person and at once hugged him while reciting the Analects.

"The civil exams⁴ of the Tang dynasty aren't easy to pass. I don't know if your dad [modern] can succeed." Wang Juan was a bit envious of Zhang Xiaobao. Mainly because up until now, she still had not seen her parents of this lifetime. They actually didn't care after they had dropped her off with another family. She drank her milk together with Zhang Xiaobao from Mrs. Zhang-Wang's milk. It wasn't as good as she imagined. But who let her own mother not have any breast milk? They mentioned that while she was listening to them talk yesterday.

"Wrong. The Tang dynasty's civil exams are the easiest to pass. As long as your reputation gets out there and you find the right people, there's no problem at all. To me, this point is not an obstacle, either. Even if I were to use money to smash it, I'm going to smash out a great golden road for my dad [modern]. Hearing them talk yesterday, your parents will come here today. At that time, don't be shy. When you should call Mom, say Mom; when you should call Dad, say Dad." Zhang Xiaobao was confident that he had a few tricks up his sleeve when it came to promotion.

“My own Dad [modern] and Mom [modern] are still living and I’m now going to have to call somebody else Dad and Mom—it’s all your fault.” Wang Juan complained out of habit.

“Are you Xianglin Sister-in-law?”⁵⁶

“Just commenting isn’t okay? Don’t assume that by lying together with you that I’ll marry you in the future. Maybe I’ll find someone even better! Humph!” Wang Juan started retaliating.

Zhang Xiaobao gave Wang Juan a once over and sighed: “You old maid, 30 years old and you still never even had a boyfriend. You’re childishly acting out with me now but how old are you? Find someone else? Find someone else who can treat you like I do? This is the Tang dynasty. No matter how open and free it is, it’s still a misogynist patriarchy.⁷ I’ll take a bit of a loss here—who let me cause you to arrive here?”

“Shut up. Go down faster!” Wang Juan obviously didn’t want to hear Zhang Xiaobao speak like this and urged him to get down.

Zhang Xiaobao poked his head to look down from the couch to estimate the height. He said with a bit of uncertainty: “So high. If I go down, I might fall. Also, I’ll accept it if I fall going down but what about you? Weren’t we going to practice walking together?”

“You stupid? You go down and then catch me from below. I’ll jump on top of your body. Theoretically, you won’t break from the

fall. You're fat and plump so be a meat cushion. Go down quickly. Don't give me any excuses. You can jump 15 meters straight down unharmed and climb up 9 meter high walls bare-handed—how can you be afraid of such a height?" Wang Juan vigorously pushed Zhang Xiaobao toward the edge of the couch.

Zhang Xiaobao constantly took deep breaths as he adjusted his own condition. Seeing that he was nearly at the edge, he looked back and said: "How about we practice a bit on the bed right now? All right, all right. We'll practice on the ground. Don't push. I'll go myself. So then, I'll turn around and slide down. You'll try your best to pull me from up top. Calm down. Even if you let me die from the fall, you still won't be able to go back."

As Zhang Xiaobao spoke, he first let his two little legs dangle down from the couch as he grabbed Wang Juan's little hand with his own. While he slowly scooted down bit by bit, he grumbled: "What is this? Yingtao should consider that no matter how big the couch is, children still have to turn their bodies. What to do if we fall? Doesn't she know to get something to block it?"

"Whose child have you seen that can flip their bodies over at this age? When they wake up and see no one's around, the first thing they would do is to cry. Wouldn't Yingtao know with one cry? You wait first. We're both being foolish. Get up. Help me throw this blanket down. It can buffer us a bit." Wang Juan tightly grabbed Zhang Xiaobao's hand as she suddenly thought of an even better way.

Zhang Xiaobao climbed back up again and threw things down together with Wang Juan. The blanket was directly flung while the

two of them kicked at the matting until there was finally a layer of padding below.

With a flip of his body, Zhang Xiaobao went down first. Looking up to gaze at Wang Juan who was watching from the sidelines, he lip-spoke: “It’s a bit jarring but it’s still fine. You, come down.”

Wang Juan verified that Zhang Xiaobao really had no problems and then followed with a twist of her body to get down. Her mouth split in a grin when she landed on top of the matting. When she wanted to get up, Zhang Xiaobao held her down: “Don’t move. First, let the internal organs settle a bit and after a while, lean on the couch to circle around.”

Wang Juan obediently waited for a moment before then slowly clambering up and holding hands together with Zhang Xiaobao, they both circled around the couch. If they found any instability beneath their feet, they would lean on couch for support. They had an awareness of balance but it was a strain for their leg muscles to support them. Fortunately, the both of them were the type who had endured hardship before.

“Yesterday, you said there was a way to let other people trust us and do things according to our wishes. How do we proceed?” Having already walked around the couch 3 times, Wang Juan asked Zhang Xiaobao as she moved her little legs in steps.

“Simple. As long as we can talk, we’ll have a reason. Find 2 people to take care of just us. Then, I can trick—no, guide them into feeling that they should do what we say. On this point, I feel that there are no problems. You have to trust me.” Zhang Xiaobao

was also striding forth with effort while he spoke.

The both of them were like they were on a stroll, chatting about what would happen afterwards as they circled the couch again and again. It wasn't until they were a bit dizzy that Wang Juan suggested: "Let's go outside to walk. It's good for children to get some sun. Otherwise, we'll have a calcium deficiency if we're always indoors."

"All right. Used to walking now so we can change places. Let's first wake Yingtao up." Zhang Xiaobao agreed.

"Why call her? What if they won't let us go out?" Wang Juan wanted to sneak outside.

"If you want her to die in front of us, I'll sneak outside with you. If my mom [modern] discovers we rolled off the couch and then, even went outside by ourselves without Yingtao's knowledge, do you think she'd get beaten to death?"

"Unh, the possibility of that is big—especially in this kind of time period. If a capitalist will go ahead even though they're risking the gallows when there is 300% profit, then they would at least do their best to minimize the danger and hide. But if a mother discovers their child was in danger, then she wouldn't even think of hiding in the end. Let's go wake her up."

Wang Juan thought for a bit before approving of Zhang Xiaobao's proposal.

Once the two of them reached an agreement, they held hands while walking toward the side of Yingtao who was still nodding off. Zhang Xiaobao reached out to gently push Yingtao. When Yingtao abruptly opened her eyes in shock, he said: “[Older] Sister⁸ Yingtao, take us out to walk.”

Zhang Xiaobao had already done his best to use a moderate tone of voice when speaking but it didn’t change the result one bit. Upon hearing these words, Yingtao immediately jumped up in fright. When she saw Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan again, she trembled as she asked: “You—how did you get down?”

After saying this, Yingtao couldn’t care about anything else and directly ran over to where the couch was. With one look, she understood that the two children had actually pushed the mat down. How was this possible?

“Little Mister, Little Miss, how did you run down here?” Deftly replacing the matting, Yingtao didn’t even know what to say as she knelt down in front of the two children, wrinkling her brow as she spoke.

“Go out to walk.” Zhang Xiaobao really didn’t wish to speak any more. Pointing outside with his little finger and heedless of Yingtao’s expression of surprise, he held Wang Juan’s hand as they leisurely wobbled out.

This scared Yingtao into holding the two children close. She was about to send them back but Wang Juan was angry now. She said to Yingtao: “Go out. Go out.”

She actually wanted to say even more but she was also afraid of causing unnecessary trouble so she could only express her thoughts with such brevity.

Seeing the 'furious' eyes of the two children, Yingtao was finally scared. She feared the two children saying even more things, especially if they spoke of them to the Mistress. Thinking for a while, she compromised and walked outside while carrying the two children.

Once outside, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan struggled to get down on the ground. Under Yingtao's nervous gaze, they held hands while slowly sauntering under the sunlight.

"Yingtao, why did you lead Baolang and Juan-Juan out here?" Just when Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were enjoying the sunlight, a voice suddenly appeared. Startling Yingtao with a jolt, she looked at the two children walking there, not knowing what she should say.

Walking into the courtyard, Mrs. Zhang-Wang had just finished telling off Yingtao when suddenly as if discovering a miracle, she pointed at Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan and said to a man and woman at her side: "In-laws, look quickly! Baolang and Juan-Juan can actually walk!"

There was no need for her to say so as the two people were also watching the two children with hand in hand walk back and forth there.

“[Older] Sister, really—they really can walk! Yesterday, I heard the people that [Older] Sister sent say that they could speak. I can’t believe that today they can actually walk. Look, even though they’re so small, they know to hold hands as they walk.” That woman also excitedly spoke, wanting to get closer but also afraid of disturbing the two children’s walk.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan naturally heard these voices. They glanced down at their upraised hands wanting to explain that they were only holding hands to maintain each other’s balance but they basically didn’t know what to say.

While Yingtao didn’t know what she should do, Mrs. Zhang-Wang finally spoke: “Yingtao, not bad. You were able to lead Baolang and Juan-Juan to learn to walk. A reward.”

After saying this, she once again took out a wooden piece to throw toward Yingtao. Once she caught it in her hands and saw the words on it, Yingtao ended up in a faint. Written on it was ‘20 wen [cash].’⁹

Notes:

¹ “Zhang Wang Shi” (張王氏) compounds the maiden surname of Zhang Xiaobao’s mother with her married surname to form the equivalent of “Zhang née Wang.” It literally translates to “Zhang Wang clan/surname.” Since women were only recorded by their surnames in ancient China if they wedded in the genealogy books of their husband’s clan (dooming them to obscurity and no ritual offerings in the afterlife if they died young, unwed, or had no male

offspring), they were referred to by their husband's surname preceding their maiden surname like how some modern women in the West will append their married surname after their maiden surname (i.e. Mrs. Jill Smith-Jones) instead of going with the traditional practice of replacing their original surname with their husband's name (i.e. Mrs. John Smith). Their given names were considered maiden names and rarely used in public, much less after marriage so referring to a woman as someone who was surnamed So-and-so is the equivalent as calling her a woman born of So-and-so clan. In ancient China, the husband's surname is deliberately placed first, capping the maiden surname as a symbol of how the husband's clan supersedes the woman's birth clan in priority. To create a similar effect, I am translating it as "Mrs. Zhang-Wang."

[2\]](#) The word Wang Juan uses here is "Ba" (爸), the modern way of saying Dad. The ancient way of saying Dad is "Die" (爹). Because they will mostly be using the ancient term, I will only be noting when they use the modern-day terminology.

[3\]](#) The [Analects](#) or "Lun Yu" (論語) are a compilation of ideas and sayings attributed to the Chinese philosopher, [Confucius](#) (孔子), and is one of the [Four Books](#) that are considered the classic examples of Confucian texts. This book is similar to Plato's compilation of his dialogues with Socrates in that it was not actually written by Confucius but compiled by his students and scholars after the fact. This book was commonly used as a basic text to study and learn their characters in ancient China due to its moralistic adages.

[4\]](#) The [civil examinations](#) or "keju" (科舉) was an examination system in Imperial China that tested the candidates' knowledge on

the classics and literature for the purpose of choosing officials with each successive round, culling more and more people while granting educational credentials that were the equivalent of diplomas that accorded certain privileges to those that passed. It was the ticket to success in ancient China, creating a relatively meritocratic class of scholar-officials and literati to counter the aristocracy that gained their titles through military exploits (usually granted as rewards for helping found the dynasty or through wars). The historical influence of this system is likely why Asia still emphasizes universal standardized testing on a national level complete with ladder systems for schools with the most nerve-wracking exam being the one high school students take since it decides what colleges they can get into.

5] “Xianglin Sao” (祥林嫂) is the main character in the 1924 short story, [The New Year Sacrifice](#) or “Zhu Fu” (祝福), by [Lu Xun](#) (鲁迅), which is part of a compilation called “Na Han” (呐喊) or Call to Arms. The story illustrates the various tragedies that are forced upon Xianglin Sao that she endures as a commentary on how inhumane the traditional Chinese customs and its corresponding mindset could be. Because at one point, she gains the habit of lamenting her lot in life to anyone who would listen, Zhang Xiaobao is likely referencing this character to mock Wang Juan regarding her constant complaints.

6] “Sao” (嫂) is the term used to address the wife of an older brother, regardless of her actual age in relation to the speaker. In the case of Xianglin Sao, it is being used as a polite way of addressing an older woman who is married and was a subtle way for Lu Xun to call attention to her marital status since it is a significant plot point and emphasizes how male-dependent her status was in that society.

[7\]](#) The phrase used here (男尊女卑) is literally “male authority, female servility” which is an encapsulation of how in ancient China, the status of men was to be respected while the status of women was to be lowly and humble. So I translated it as “misogynistic patriarchy.”

[8\]](#) “Jie-Jie” (姐姐) means older sister. In this case, Zhang Xiaobao is using this term to be respectful. Technically, he doesn’t have to address her like this and can just call her by name as an equal or subordinate due to his higher status.

[9\]](#) “Wen” (文) or [cash](#) was the basic currency unit of ancient China with one copper coin playing the equivalent role of a dollar. I’m translating it with the pinyin because the value of the wen was so variable over the ages and using the translation of cash might sound too generic as a word for use as a specific unit and add to reader confusion.

Chapter 5: The Swindler Turns Around Intent To Scheme

Mrs. Zhang-Wang and Wang Juan's parents had no time to pay attention to Yingtao's agitation. They were excited, too. Watching their children from their birth to learning how to talk and walk was a process that was the happiest matter for those who are parents.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan became like treasures that were surrounded and watched over as well as periodically called upon to say something nice. This commotion was nothing to Zhang Xiaobao as he was willing to enjoy this sort of coziness. But Wang Juan couldn't take it. She just couldn't understand why, as mature as Zhang Xiaobao was, he liked being infantile.¹ It looked like the team sending her to get the money was a wrong decision. They should have found a mother with child in tow. She trusted they would have gotten even more money.

To avoid this kind of helplessness, Wang Juan had to resort to feigning sleepiness as she gave Zhang Xiaobao a secret signal with the thinking that they could still continue their interactions later. Zhang Xiaobao also played along with Wang Juan as they yawned in unison and they began to be unable to keep their eyes open.

Waiting until the adults found another place to discuss today's happy business, Wang Juan who had been repositioned back onto the couch finally sighed as she patted Zhang Xiaobao beside her and said: "Can you not be so juvenile in the future? How old are you?"

“Without never having lost, you will never understand what it is to have. This kind of happiness, how many times can a person enjoy it in a lifetime? Not to mention I’ve never enjoyed it before. I’m not prepared to leave behind any regrets. You go be your grownup and I’ll be my child. Let’s see who first runs into trouble?” Zhang Xiaobao was still reminiscing about that kind of sensation with closed eyes as he conversely gave advice to Wang Juan.

“Keep pretending. This one day, ~ah... When can we have a clear space to better plan out our own matters? You even said to help pave the way for your dad [modern]. Based on how it looks here, don’t expect too much.” Wang Juan muttered, wanting to turn over but instead discovered that her body still couldn’t do this. The only posture was lying prone.

“One week. Give me another week’s time and I’ll be able to let us have an excuse to use our talents. For this week, you and I will keep talking and add a bit of content to our speech each day so people will believe that we’re child prodigies. That’s the deal.”

Zhang Xiaobao made the final decision.

The summer weather changed as it pleased. The previous few days were bright with sunlight but today was overcast in gloom as if the sky would fall down at any time. The wind swept across the ground in swirls and even the dirt that was whipped up looked dark. The majority of people were all either hiding indoors or under the canopy of outdoor tea vendors.

Only a minority of people were especially spirited upon seeing

that it was about to rain as with an umbrella in tow, they deliberately walked to the site of a bridge or outside of the tea vendors' awnings to wait for the arrival of the rain.

Through the past 7 days of pretending to be child prodigies which caused the adults to puff up with pride, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan finally got a special privilege. That was that the both of them were able to each order around a maid servant or manservant—or footmen—to do some things such as letting the maids and footmen carry them to go outside to look at the scenery or to take them to the garden in back to look at the flowers and grass.

The both of them extremely cherished this limited freedom. Seeing that today would rain, they hid inside their room. Bidding people to open the window, they looked at the view outside. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both liked this type of weather, especially with the dark clouds up in the sky that gave people a feeling of pressure. The both of them were willing to face the pressure so they looked on with exuberant interest.

But this was hard on the maid Yingtao and the other manservant, Erniu,² who feared that the two little ancestors³ would be blown at by the wind and also worried that they would be drizzled on by the rain in a bit. Thus, they were on tenterhooks⁴ as they waited to the side, not stopping in their persuasion.

“Mister Bao,⁵ why don't we step back and then look? It'd still be able to see clearly what the rain is like. Add on another piece of clothing and then that would be even more comfortable.” Near Zhang Xiaobao, Erniu was relatively clever in his suggestion.

Zhang Xiaobao appeared to not have heard. After quite a while and the rain looked like it was about to fall did he suddenly say: “Erniu, what do you say if in a while the rainy wind blows in and gets me and Juan-Juan drenching wet, we both cry together, and we say that it was you who pushed us toward the windowsill when my mom comes? Do you think that my mom would trust your explanation or would trust the two of us?”

Zhang Xiaobao’s talk was only that—talk. But the words he said gave Erniu and Yingtao a frightening shock as their mouths gaped wide open, momentarily not knowing how to answer.

“Yeah, at that time, me and Xiaobao will say to my Mom [in-law] that the two of you didn’t wish to take care of us so you did something like that in preparation for transferring to a position someplace else. What consequence would that have?” Next to him, Wang Juan backed him up.

Right now, Erniu was already not considering why the two children could speak so many words that should not be coming out of children’s mouths. With a thump, he kneeled down on the ground with his face all scrunched up as he begged Zhang Xiaobao: “Little ancestor, I, Erniu’s entire family have dedicated all our hearts and effort to working at the Manor. I haven’t offended you [honorific]! You [honorific] can’t be like this! Even if I weren’t beaten to death, I would be driven away. My entire family would be finished. I beg of you [honorific]! I’ll kowtow⁶ to you. Please let me off.”

Yingtao also reacted and kneeled down, too. This gave Zhang

Xiaobao and Wang Juan a frightful shock. They didn't think that they would get such a result with just a single breezy sentence.

“Get up. Get up. Don't kneel. Don't kowtow, either. We were just asking casually to see if my Mom would trust you guys or trust us.” Zhang Xiaobao wanted to help the two people up but after reaching out with a hand, he discovered that he only just touched the two people's chest and fearing he had no way to help them up, could only use persuasion.

“Little Mister, this even requires asking? What adult would even believe their own child of only 1 year of age was able to lie? The more I and Yingtao explain ourselves, the greater the trouble. Moreover, it's even the both of you [honorific] saying this. Even if Mistress knew you were lying, she would wonder why you were doing this. With that, she'd definitely find me and Yingtao an eyesore, thinking we didn't do a good job looking after you.” Erniu didn't dare get up as he remained there and replied honestly.

“Oh~! So that's how it is. That's good, then. We wanted to discuss something with you two a bit. What do you think?” What Zhang Xiaobao wanted was this answer.

“Whatever you [honorific] say, Yingtao and I will definitely obey. There's no need for discussion. Whatever you [honorific] say is, is.” Erniu only now realized that Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan's speech was not childish at all. To the side, Yingtao vigorously nodded as well.

It was easy now. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan gave a few requests to Erniu and Yingtao. That was, one, no matter how out

of the ordinary the things that the both of them did were, they could not tell anyone else and that included Mistress, Master, Old Madam, and Old Master.

Two, no matter what things the both of them did later on, they could not ask the reason why and couldn't not do them, either. At the same time, they couldn't let anyone else be aware of this. Otherwise, they could imagine the consequences.

Erniu and Yingtao dared not say even a word of refusal. Whatever Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan proposed was promised to. Offending the two children was certainly more severe than offending Mistress. Displeasing Mistress led to nothing more than a salary fine or a beating. Displeasing the children? Even if they didn't die, they would lose a layer of skin. Besides, even if they made a mistake, the two children would then naturally carry the brunt of the burden. This was only what Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan had pledged them.

The rain finally fell with a pitter-patter on the open window. The wind blew the window till it creaked. Yet, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan's mood kept improving. Looking outside at that torrential downpour, they gazed at each other and smile. Everything was left unspoken in the silence.

It rained for an entire day and only gradually lessened when it was nighttime. After having milk, the two who had just woken up called over Erniu and Yingtao. They first told Yingtao to keep watch by the doorway outside and to give a warning if she discovered someone coming. Then, Zhang Xiaobao said to Erniu: "Erniu, who do you have in your family? Have you taken a wife

yet?”

“I haven’t. I’m only 17. Don’t see how hearty I look, I’m really not that big so I’m not in a hurry to take a wife. I’ll see once my older brother weds. Oh, of my family, my parents are still present. Above me, I have an older brother. Below me, I have a 9 year old younger sister. My mom said to save another year of money and we can find a wife for my older brother and I’ll have an [older] sister-in-law.” Erniu respectfully replied.

“Oh, good. Your parents being still present is good. Having an older brother and younger sister is even better. That’s more like a family. I also want to have a younger sister or older brother but it’s too bad as I’m the eldest. Don’t know if my mom will give birth to more younger brothers and sisters later on. What does your [older] brother do?” Zhang Xiaobao continued asking.

Erniu didn’t think he would hear such words. Thinking of his own family, they really were not bad. So smiling happily, he replied: “In answer to Little Mister’s words, my [Older] Brother Daniu⁷ works the land during the busy farming season and does some odd jobs during the idle times. He can even earn some extra rice and salt. [Younger] Sister helps gather some firewood. My parents also work the land during the busy season and does some work for others when idle.”

“It doesn’t seem to be the farming season right now?” Zhang Xiaobao directed this at Wang Juan. Wang Juan thought for a bit and nodded.

“Not busy. It’s busy after 2 more months. We’re all idle.” Erniu

answered upon hearing the question.

“It’s good that it’s not busy. We can find something to do. Especially for your [Older] Brother Daniu. What to do?” Zhang Xiaobao got lost in thought. Wang Juan knew that this international great scammer was starting to plot against people. She was prepared as well. If Zhang Xiaobao still wished to continue running cons, then no matter what, she would prevent it.

Seeing Zhang Xiaobao’s brow wrinkle, Wang Juan worried in private. With such a troubled face on such a huge swindler, the matter he was thinking of absolutely was not as simple as a minor hassle. There was no doubt about the scammer’s capabilities.

“I have it.” Zhang Xiaobao’s brow suddenly cleared as he yelled excitedly.

“Have what? You can’t swindle people.” Wang Juan trembled in fright. Her first thought was: was this criminal swindler getting ready to go scam a region’s highest official? Like a prefectural governor,⁸ a chief of the Three Departments and Six Ministries,⁹ etc. These were all a possibility. Back then, he sure cheated quite a few of the Level 1 provinces.¹⁰

Zhang Xiaobao gave Wang Juan a slightly discontent look as he said: “Do I need to swindle just to earn a bit of money? Could it be that in your heart, I’ve always been a swindler? I can turn around,¹¹ too.”

“A swindler saying they’re turning around—who can guarantee that it’s not another trick?” Wang Juan did not show one bit of mercy to Zhang Xiaobao.

“Never mind. Let’s not speak of this. Look, Erniu is all muddled. Let’s talk about the main issue. This matter needs Erniu’s [Older] Brother Daniu to go do it. Erniu, listen well. Now, I’m assigning you a glorious yet grave mission. Do you have the confidence to complete it?” Zhang Xiaobao gave a look as he solemnly spoke to Erniu.

Notes:

[1\]](#) The phrase Wang Juan uses to describe what Xiaobao is doing here is “zhuang nen” (裝嫩), which literally translates to “pretend tender.” It’s usually an expression applied to older women who act much younger than their actual ages because they’re pretending to still be tender young things. This is because a woman’s beauty is usually compared a flower whose time of blooming is so short and the character for tender, “nen” (嫩), is also often the adjective applied to young shoots or sprouts. Because of this, young girls and women tend to be described as tender in Chinese as a compliment. In this case though, Wang Juan is mocking Xiaobao as a man who is mentally in his thirties but is literally acting like a baby.

[2\]](#) “Erniu” (二牛) means “two ox/bull.” The rustic nature of his name suggests that it is a birth name given by his parents (and that he was not renamed when entering the service of the Zhang family as is the custom with such servant-master arrangements since the renaming is a symbolic cutting of ties with the previous identity of a free man), possibly because he was the second child and wished for him to be healthy and strong as an ox. Coincidentally, this kind

of naming sensibility not only gives off a folksy feeling in Chinese, it is also a display of the superstition that comes into play wherein parents will give their kids names that are either terms for common objects or have derogatory meanings in order to confuse any devils or spirits that might kidnap them.

3] The Chinese believe in [ancestor worship](#) so referring to someone as a “zu zong” (祖宗), which means “ancestor,” suggests that the person being so described is being likened to as being waited upon and treated as if they were. It usually comes up as a term of flattery when the speaker is either groveling or as hyperbole when joking.

4] The idiom used here is “ti xin diao dan” (提心吊膽), which literally means “raised heart, hanging gallbladder.” It’s a metaphor for a state of extreme worry like being on pins and needles so I translated it as being on tenterhooks as it was the best English expression that I could think of with the closest equivalent imagery and meaning.

5] Similar to Zhang Xiaobao’s nickname, “Baolang” (寶郎), Erniu is referring to him as “Bao Gongzi” (寶公子) which is combining the “Bao” (寶) element of his name with the title that I’ve translated as “Mister.” Note that it wouldn’t be the same in meaning as another title that would also be translated as “Mr. Bao,” “Bao Xiansheng” (包先生), where it is literally a man being referred to as Mister attached to a surname, “Bao” (包), which is a homophone for the “Bao” (寶) in Xiaobao’s name.

6] “[Kowtow](#)” is an English loan word for the act of [prostrating](#) oneself on one’s knees and bowing down one’s head until the

forehead touches the ground. It is derived from “kou tou” (磕頭) or “ke tou” (叩頭), which means to “knock head” or “touch head” to the floor respectively. The original spelling of kowtow is derived from the romanization of the Cantonese pronunciation, which is “kau tau,” reflecting the origin of how it was adopted into English. This act showed reverence and/or submission, being far more common of a sight in ancient China than in modern times. Nowadays, a deep bow has replaced it in usage. For comparison, a similar stance would be the Japanese “[dogeza](#).”

[7\]](#) “Daniu” (大牛) means “big ox,” suggesting that he is the first son, which fits the same naming theme as Erniu’s as well as matches their respective birth order in their family.

[8\]](#) “Zhi Fu” (知府) is the head magistrate or governor of a prefecture, which is an administrative or geographic region that is the equivalent of a state or province.

[9\]](#) The [Three Departments and Six Ministries](#) or “Sansheng Liubu” (三省六部) is the name for the administrative structure of the Tang Chinese government with each department and ministry being responsible for a specific area of function for the government. There were other divisions and ranking systems that were historically used, too.

[10\]](#) Wang Juan is referring to the governors of the highest level of modern-day China’s administrative divisions, the provinces. Modern China divides its geography into varying levels and sublevels in an administrative structure that can get quite complex, especially because of the territories that are treated as special cases. The [provinces](#) are ranked in the 1st level and are in

the top tier of the administrative pyramid.

[11](#) The act of turning around, “hui tou” (回頭), or more literally, turning one’s head around, references two sayings. One is the Chinese translation of the Biblical phrase, the return of the prodigal son, where “langzi hui tou” (浪子回頭) literally means “the (roaming) wastrel turns their head around.” Another is a Buddhist aphorism, “hui tou shi an” (回頭是岸), that advises that if you turn your head and look back, the shore is still there. The literal translation means “turning the head is the shore.” These two adages both speak of repentance and turning over a new leaf. Thus, the chapter title and how Xiaobao is using this phrase has a dual meaning of the literal action as well as a metaphor.

Chapter 6: Who Is Facing Heaven Raising Up A Storm

Erniu still had no way of appreciating the profound implications of this sort of bluff by Zhang Xiaobao. So his answer was not the three words of “I have confidence” and not even “I guarantee mission completion.” Instead, he vigorously nodded his head as he said: “Little Mister, please say so. Whatever you [honorific] say, I, Erniu will do it. Letting my [Older] Bro do it is fine, too.”

“What are you having Daniu do?” Wang Juan nervously asked.

“Don’t worry. Keep listening. I wouldn’t actually let him commit murder or arson.” Zhang Xiaobao turned his head to continue talking to Erniu: “Over the next few days, have your [Older] Bro and [Younger] Sister go up the mountain to find some mountain chili sprouts. After gathering them, then...”

“Little Mister, what kind of thing is this mountain chili sprout that you [honorific] speak of?” Erniu didn’t wait for Zhang Xiaobao to finish talking before he interrupted with a question.

“Oh, it’s like this. See my hand? It’s a plant that’s this big. Green like grass. Basically, the mountains here should all have them. When you chew it in your mouth, it’s spicy. If you soak it in water and then eat it, it’s not as spicy. Seen it before?” Zhang Xiaobao gestured as he spoke.

Erniu watched for a while and nodded: “In reply to Little Mister, I’ve seen it before—even eaten it before.”

“That’s good, then. Pick this thing—pick lots of it. Have your parents go buy some fish for me. Try to get fish with as few bones as possible and buy lots of them. I’ll get some money for you and give it to you tomorrow. Anything else...? Yes, there is. Go and find a blacksmith from our manor and have them make stuff for me. Like this. I’ll draw it for you. You, look.”

Zhang Xiaobao couldn’t explain it well at the moment so he tightly gripped a little wooden stick in his hand to draw on the ground. Only now did he discover how inconvenient it was to do anything when so small. He clearly knew how it should be drawn in his mind. It was actually an iron case, the sort with a flap, that could be used to grill or bake things.

After drawing for a while, he finally finished. But upon seeing it, Erniu wrinkled his brow as he quietly said in a low voice: “Little Mister, this thing you [honorific] want is entirely iron? This won’t be so easy to do. So much iron... It can’t be kept hidden from people. I...”

“No matter what method you use, do this job for me. If you do it well, there’ll be a reward. After money is made, your family can split it. If you do it poorly, I’ll find someone else and you won’t need to follow us anymore.” Zhang Xiaobao didn’t listen to this kind of rationale at all. He didn’t believe that such a clever person as Erniu could do poorly. There was some difficulty but that didn’t mean that it couldn’t be solved.

“Little Mister, I’ll go do it. I dare not split the money. Working for the master-family is what I should do. Just when the time

comes, calculating my wages as rice grains will do.” Erniu still agreed. He wasn’t prepared to ask for that rice at first. But he discovered that all of the people in his family had to work, meaning that they couldn’t do any other jobs and that would lead to a huge difference. So he worked up the guts to say this.

“I said for your family to get a cut so your family should get a cut. Refuting our words is not allowed. Understand?” Wang Juan, seeing that Zhang Xiaobao seemed to not be scamming for money and was expanding into business, spoke up as well. Don’t just look at how small they were, they were naturally not lacking in airs.

Erniu nodded and, not caring that it was still drizzling outside, immediately ran out to go home to set this up. Wang Juan now had the time to interrogate Zhang Xiaobao.

“What are your arrangements today for?”

“What else is it for? To make money, ~bei.² In this world, the most fundamental is military power. Other than military power, it’s money. Right now, military power is not doable. So let’s get money.” Seeing that Erniu had left to do the job, Zhang Xiaobao also loosened up as he leisurely replied.

“Order after order come out after just a brow wrinkle and an eye blink? The International Criminal Swindler definitely doesn’t have an unearned reputation. Tell me, what kind of profit?” Looking at that cute face of Zhang Xiaobao’s right now, Wang Juan felt that this person was all right as she asked, smiling.

“Insulting people, ~ne?³ Don’t keep saying swindler, Comrade Wang Juan. Right now, I must solemnly request of you to please respect me. At this moment, I am a good citizen, a good person.” Zhang Xiaobao looked at Wang Juan who was just as cute. But who let the two of them both be children? They were children of affluent families as well with no lack in their diet and were well-dressed so that they were white and plump.

Seeing the face full of disapproval on Wang Juan, he continued speaking: “Buying fish is for the sake of making grilled fish strips to sell to other people. No, to exchange with others. Things aren’t easy to sell but bartering is simpler. That case is going to be used to dry the fish strips. It can be used as an oven later on, too—to bake breads, cakes, whatever. It can also be used to exchange for things.”

“Don’t grilled fish strips use filefish?⁴ You had them go buy it but where can they get that type of fish? Isn’t that a marine fish? Then, what did you get the chili sprouts for? To rub on the fish strips?” Wang Juan still had this little bit of common sense as she knew the fish that grilled fish strips used.

“Who am I? According to you, a big swindler. How can the idea I thought up be that simple? Even if other people don’t know grilled fish strips are dried using an iron case, there are other methods to dry it with. As long as they find it good, they’ll study it. There’s no patent protection, either. The fish over here is cheap. We can buy quite a few with only a little money. But food grain⁵ is expensive. I can ask my mom [modern] for a little bit of money to use to buy fish but I have no way of using it to buy enough food grain.

Actually, any fish is fine. Exchange the grilled fish strips for soybeans.⁶ The real money-maker is in making soybean paste sauce.⁷ Specifically, in making spicy soybean paste sauce. Add in douban⁸ and diced meat. We'll sell the soybean paste sauce. This soybean paste sauce won't be used for bartering but sold for money. Or for silk textiles—who let it be so that this stuff could be used just like money?⁹

After we have enough money, we can go forward with the next step. The more capital there is, the better deals I can make. First, clear up the matter of the land. Then, buy land, plant stuff, buy more things, make some more deals. Of course, if you don't object to my using a few little tricks, I can directly make currency exchange deals using money and silk textiles. You should get my meaning." Zhang Xiaobao explained with the same slow leisure as before.

"What do you mean, currency exchange deals? You want to swindle again? No, when you make currency exchanges, there's no resource generation. It's nothing more than to get your hands on money and it needs to be done with speed. I won't allow it. What if you get caught? Arresting you won't even need any legality. There's too much abuse of power in this time period. You can't even run to escape." Wang Juan firmly opposed it.

Zhang Xiaobao thought Wang Juan didn't wish for him to run scams. Only now did he understand that Wang Juan was afraid he would get in trouble. His mood naturally not the same, he thought for a bit before speaking again: "Then, I won't do anything like that. In regards to the actual capital, I'll take care of it. Don't worry. I won't do anything that would harm others. When

forbidden to accumulate capital through pure robbery, I, as an International Criminal Swindler, can think of a lot of ways to slowly earn it. This slowness is relative. I will work through the production and processing method.”

In listening to Zhang Xiaobao’s words, Wang Juan suddenly discovered that the attitude of this swindler who had violence and caring, brain and brawn that everything was all in his hands at this very moment was such a dazzling sight.

How could Zhang Xiaobao know Wang Juan what was thinking? Even if he had studied so much psychology, he had never come in contact with the field of female psychology. He was currently pondering how to ask for money from his mother as the funds were all controlled by Mrs. Zhang-Wang. He at last decided to bite the bullet¹⁰ and just ask.

The next day, the sky was clear. Erniu had already told everything to his family members and even stayed overnight at his house. Knowing that Little Mister was in a hurry over this matter, he rushed back. At this time, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan usually got ready to go to sleep after having finished their milk.

Today, Zhang Xiaobao who normally readily went to sleep suddenly said to Mrs. Zhang-Wang: “Mom, Juan-Juan and I want to buy some things. We need 1 guan [string] of cash¹¹ prepared to let Yingtao go buy it.”

“So much? Tell Mom, what does my Baolang want to buy? Mom will go buy it for you.” Upon hearing it was 1 guan [string] of cash,

Mrs. Zhang-Wang was also a bit hesitant. Thinking that the children didn't know what to buy so they had just casually said 1 guan [string], she wanted to clarify so she could purchase it or maybe trade for it as there was basically no need to spend too much money.

Zhang Xiaobao certainly did not agree. He hoped to use this money to buy fish. One guan [string] of cash or 1,000 wen [cash] could buy several hundred fish. Southern fish, Northern sheep;¹² the fish here had always been very cheap. He said: "Mom, we need to buy lots and lots of things. I can't think of it all for now. Give money for Yingtao to buy it."

Hearing this, Mrs. Zhang-Wang looked at Wang Juan as well. Wang Juan felt unable to ask for this. After all, this money wasn't being taken from her family. So she could only nod.

"All right. Mom will give it. If Baolang wants to buy it, Mom will give it. Mom will come along and see then—the things my Baolang buys will definitely be better than anyone else's." Seeing her son speak like this, Mrs. Zhang-Wang didn't reject it, either. One guan [string] of cash was a bit much but who else had children that knew how to spend money when they were so small? So just let him spend it. Whatever things he bought back would be fine. It wasn't like that 1 guan [string] of cash would suddenly disappear.

Giving permission to her son on the one hand, she then called over Yingtao on the other hand. Removing a wooden piece that had 1 guan [string] written on it, she placed it in Yingtao's hand as she said: "Yingtao, take this money. Whatever you buy, remember to account for it. Remember, prices that should be bargained over

still need to be negotiated.”

“I understand, Mistress.” Yingtao accepted the wooden piece. After glancing over at Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan and seeing the two of them nod slightly, she respectfully answered.

Having settled their concerns, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan naturally wanted to sleep. Waiting until his mother had left, Zhang Xiaobao sighed as he said: “I keep feeling like I deceived my Mom.”

“No, it’s not even deception. You really do need to use this money to buy things. You’re not squandering it and you can even make money later on.” Wang Juan comforted him.

“The deception I’m talking about isn’t this. It’s that I didn’t tell my Mom the things that I want to do.”

“You stupid? If you really told your mom [modern], would she agree? You must know that deception can be divided into good and bad intentions. Your deception is for the sake of making money for the family to spend. This is a good intention. It’s at least much better than how you were before. Over 30 billion, ~ah! And it’s even U.S. dollars. All just stolen by you. Those officials all deserve to die.” Wang Juan continued reassuring him.

“The total is over 200 billion. Your investigations are not detailed at all. Domestically, it’s over 30 billion.” Zhang Xiaobao explained.

“I have nothing to do with overseas. You should have—the more,

the better. Justice belongs to the whole of humanity but my citizenship has me belonging to my own homeland.” It looked like Wang Juan was not suited to work for Interpol as she was a bit radical.

Having gotten money, everything was easy to accomplish. Zhang Xiaobao had Yingtao take the money out and give it to Erniu. He told him that when buying in bulk, he could further lower the price and even to try credit billing¹³ after making two purchases. After letting Erniu go off to work, he and Wang Juan continued exercising their bodies as they considered their future development.

Ten days quietly passed. Something called grilled fish strips began getting popular in the surrounding manors. It used no currency but trading in soybeans or other things like millet, which was foxtail millet,¹⁴ wheat, meat, and eggs was possible.

Notes:

^{1]} The “Zhi Tian” (指天) in the chapter title is likely a pun that is referring to the [facing heaven chili pepper](#) or “zhi tian jiao” (指天椒) while the phrase itself literally means to “point at the skies,” which can have the connotation of directing or ordering the heavens in order to control fate.

^{2]} I retain “~bei” (呗) sometimes in the translation because it’s an ending sentence particle that shows the speaker’s nonchalance or casual attitude. It’s a deliberate verbal tic whose purpose is to add a light or flippant tone to the speaker’s speech. This is similar to use of the “~ne” ending sentence particle in Japanese sometimes,

which can be used to seek agreement or add a playful tone and so on. Or in terms of the Internet, it is like appending LOL or emoticons after a sentence to show when one is being facetious since body language or vocal tone isn't available for interpretation to the reader online.

3] Here, “~ne” (呢) is similar in usage as ~ne is in Japanese (though it isn't necessarily the same character or word and is pronounced differently) in that it's meant to soften the meaning of speech that would otherwise sound harsher if read literally (similar to how people use LOL or emoticons online a lot more than they would in more formal writing to keep the tone light). It's meant to add a more joking or playful tone and can also be used as an interrogative sentence particle.

4] “Ma Mian Tun” (馬面魰) or literally “horse-faced fish (Tetraodontiformes)” can refer to either [filefish](#) or [black scraper](#). Since the Chinese tend to name things by compounding characters with descriptions, names for animals can be applied to multiple species that aren't actually biologically related (i.e. the words for panda, “xiong mao” (熊貓) or “mao xiong” (貓熊), which literally means bear-cat or cat-bear; or for hippopotamus, “he ma” (河馬), which means river-horse). I went with filefish since it is a broad category of fish used for consumption in Asia that happens to be made into the type of snack food that they are speaking of here.

5] The term Zhang Xiaobao is using here is “liang shi” (糧食), which specifically refers to the grains that made up the majority of the diet in ancient China. The grains were either wheat in northern China or rice in southern China (hence why certain regional cuisines emphasized noodles or breads over rice) with other grain crops like barley or millet to supplement them. Meat

was considered a luxury and only showed up with any regularity in the diet for affluent households to the point to which fatty oils were considered a luxury. So even though meat is also food, it was not something that was considered a necessity or jumped immediately to mind as food to the general populace in ancient China like the grain crops were (it was slightly different for military provisioning though). This would be similar to how foods like potatoes, pasta, or bread are normally considered the main and filling portion of Western diets.

[6\] Soybeans](#) or soya bean is called “da dou” (大豆) in Chinese meaning “big bean.” It can be referred to as yellow beans or “huang dou” (黄豆), too. Because it was the main bean crop in ancient China, the use of the generic term of “dou” (豆) or bean typically referred to soybeans.

[7\] Soybean paste sauce](#) is a fermented paste sauce made from soybeans, salt, and water. The term Zhang Xiaobao uses to refer to it here is “Da Jiang” (大醬) or literally “big paste/sauce,” which is an abbreviation of “big bean paste/sauce” (da dou jiang/大豆醬). Other names for it are “bean paste/sauce” (dou jiang/豆醬) or “yellow paste/sauce” (huang jiang/黃醬).

[8\]](#) “Douban” (豆瓣) is the term for the mashed up remnants of the soybeans after they are processed and literally means “bean parts,” similar to how bits of fruits or vegetables are left behind once processed and made into jams or sauces. [Douban Jiang](#) (豆瓣醬) is a paste sauce comprised of douban like how some tomato sauces have bits of tomato added to become chunky sauces.

[9\]](#) Zhang Xiaobao is referring to the fact that in order to

guarantee its value, the government of ancient China allowed silk textiles (no matter the quality) to be used as legal tender, even accepting it as payment for taxes in a process similar to how the U.S. Federal Reserve takes tattered dollar bills out of circulation. Keep in mind that China had a near monopoly on [silk](#) in the world at the time and it required centuries of repeated international espionage to even come close to loosening that monopoly. You can read more here on [sericulture](#), the method in which Chinese silk was and still is produced.

[10\]](#) I translated “ying zhe tou pi” (硬著頭皮) as biting the bullet. This idiom literally translates to “hardening the head skin/scalp,” which is likely a tangential reference to the concept of face and how one had to have thick (facial) skin in order to ignore any embarrassment or shame or humiliation that might need to be endured.

[11\]](#) “Yi guan qian” (一貫錢) or one string of [cash](#) was usually 1,000 coins (wen/文) strung together though the exact amount could vary from time to time or with regional custom. A string was subdivided into 10 sections of 100 coins each with the entire string being equivalent in value to 1 silver [tael](#). If 1 coin (wen/文 or cash) was the equivalent of 1 dollar, then a string of cash was the equivalent to 1,000 dollars. This was derived from the fact that ancient Chinese coins were usually cast with a hole in the center, making it easy to thread a string through them. I will refer to it in text as guan [string] to differentiate it as a monetary unit from actual strings of thread or rope.

[12\]](#) “Nan yu Bei yang” (南魚北羊) or “Southern fish, Northern sheep/goat” is a saying that refers to the meat that each regional cuisine is famed for since they were in plentiful supply in those

areas. The phrase also alludes to a visual pun made in Chinese with the character for “fresh” or “xian” (鮮), which is created by combining the characters for fish and sheep/goat into one.

[13\]](#) “She zhang” (賒帳) is a method of purchase where the merchant trusts the buyer to pay them back later while allowing the buyer to receive the goods beforehand. This is the principle that credit cards or a bar tab is based on.

[14\]](#) “Su” (粟) refers to millet in general, which is a plant that has several cultivars. The common name of “xiao mi” (小米), meaning “little rice,” refers to the [foxtail millet](#) which is the variant common in China that is traditionally said to have been cultivated by the mythical ruler, [Shennong](#) (神農), in Chinese folklore.

Chapter 7: Build Up Guts Of A Bear For The Sake Of Parents

Erniu was bewildered by the money earned by this thing called grilled fish strips—or more precisely, the items earned. He never thought that the fish he had never liked eating, after going through such processing, would be this tasty. These days, every time he came over from home, he would bring several fish strips to share together with Yingtao.

“Hey, do you think that there are some illicit feelings between Erniu and Yingtao?” Through observation, Wang Juan discovered this bit. During today’s walking exercise time, she asked why was it that Erniu gave only Yingtao fish strips but never gave any to her and Zhang Xiaobao.

“Juan-Juan, please change the type of greeting. Don’t call me hey. You can call me Xiaobao or even call me Baolang. After all, we are one family.” Zhang Xiaobao was in a good mood. The grilled fish strips returned quite a few things which could sustain future growth.

“Comrade Zhang Xiaobao, I am not that familiar with you. Juan-Juan is not what you can call me. Don’t assume that identity will let me suddenly treat you well. Please directly answer my question.” Wang Juan was also obviously in a good mood and she even had time to playfully bicker. For her, this was very rare.

Zhang Xiaobao had no retort. He was currently still holding Wang Juan’s little hand while circling the flower urns in the garden. That sufficed in expressing the issue. There was no need to

admit to anything in speech. They were all not children. Reality would prove everything.

Wanting to pick a flower yet also discovering that his physical height was not yet high enough to climb up the flower urn, he sighed as he said: “I don’t care about the relationship between the two of them. Only when a person feels like they have no way of controlling their subordinates does a ban on this type of conduct or emotions in subordinates appear. It’s simply two people—I think I can manage that. About why he doesn’t give us grilled fish strips to eat, on this point, I would like to praise Comrade Erniu. At least, he’s not stupid and realizes that our teeth aren’t suited for eating stuff with this kind of difficulty.”

“Is your meaning that I’m stupid?” Wang Juan’s little hand used force, wanting to painfully squeeze Zhang Xiaobao. But in the end, she discovered that the physical attributes of the two of them were about equal so could only give up this action.

“Quit squeezing. It’s no use. Even if you’re stronger than me and crush the bones in my hand, do you think I would be frightened? I haven’t endured any less hardship than you. If I make one sound, then I wouldn’t be called Zhang Xiaobao. Erniu, come over—it’s all being seen into your eyes.”¹

Upon being gripped with great force by Wang Juan, Zhang Xiaobao’s little hand suddenly relaxed, using a type of passivity to let Wang Juan understand that everybody had the same kind of tenacity. He then turned his head to call out to Erniu who was over there exchanging flirty looks with Yingtao.

“Little Mister, you [honorific] called?” Erniu was fawningly² helping Yingtao rub the fish strips that were slightly tough³ when he heard Little Mister call for him. Running over agilely, he bowed his head as he smiled at Zhang Xiaobao while he spoke.

“After a bit, when me and Juan-Juan have had milk and my Mom is coming out of the room, you go and find my Mom to say that you want to partner up with my Mom in a business deal. Can you or can you not do that?” Zhang Xiaobao stared at Erniu as he asked.

“Can... Or cannot?” Erniu originally thought that Little Mister sought him out to randomly order some things. He didn’t think that it was to actually let him go into talks with Mistress. Terrified, he didn’t know how to respond for the moment.

“You’re asking me? Your family made quite a bit these few days, right? I’ve decided to offer a tenth of the profits to your family—just have to see if you can keep up appearances.” Zhang Xiaobao wrinkled his brow, a little dissatisfied with Erniu’s timidity.

Erniu gulped. Thinking of the money made from the grilled fish strips, to say that he wasn’t tempted was false. A tenth was already not a small amount. But upon thinking that the one to be faced was Mistress, he also felt like his heart had no ground.⁴ How could he dare go talk to Mistress of partnership? It was like scheming with a tiger for their pelt.

“Speak, what’s the use of simply wiping your sweat? What needs to be confronted still has to be confronted. Didn’t see that you were so hot before when you were helping Yingtao to rub the fish

strips.” Zhang Xiaobao discovered that his patience seemed to not be as good as in the past. At the same time, he was also disappointed with Erniu. With this kind of person, how could he use him to do anything in the future?

“Little Mister, I’d dare with anyone else. But Mistress, even if you [honorific] lend me the guts to do so, I don’t dare to go have talks about some partnership. I know I have caused you [honorific] to lose face. How about you [honorific] give me a beating?” Erniu thought for a bit but still couldn’t call up the resolve. Even when gambling with your life, the opponent had to be picked out.

Zhang Xiaobao shut his eyes, not really knowing what he should say. With such a plaything that couldn’t even stand up in public,⁵ he couldn’t even get angry. He turned his head to look at Wang Juan to consult: “Let’s see if we can get some money from your family. Two guan [strings] should be enough. I’m not willing to ask my Mom for money again.”

“Haven’t we already made money? What do you still want money for?” Wang Juan didn’t understand one bit. There were quite a few things received in exchange for the grilled fish strips—meat, eggs, food grains, oil. Why did Zhang Xiaobao still feel that it wasn’t enough? There were no issues with making the paste sauce anymore.

“If it really was this simple an arrangement, then it’s not me, Zhang Xiaobao. The way I do things has always been like a ring linked to a ring, as if a chain of interlocking rings. The grilled fish strips were only sold in the small surrounding areas and already had these kinds of results. Think about it. Those people with a few

resources, are they fools? If I'm not wrong in my thinking, there are already people analyzing the recipe for grilled fish strips.

I want to use the money to do a promotion and sell the theory behind making grilled fish strips so we can earn an extra sum. I'm not going swindling but I should at least get the maximum profit, right?" Zhang Xiaobao felt a bit solitary at this moment. It was lonely at the top.⁶

"You want to sell the technology for the oven? That is feasible. Then, I'll try getting some money." Wang Juan, feeling that she understood, agreed with a nod.

But Zhang Xiaobao shook his head: "Don't look at how simple making an oven is but I definitely won't sell it. I want to bake cakes in the future, ~ne. What I'm selling is the recipe for the grilled fish strips. Whatever else, the oven can't be taken out. Wait until after I've finished baking cakes and have been noticed by some people to discuss that."

"What recipe do grilled fish strips have? Isn't it just pickling and drying? Getting a grasp of these basics is enough." Wang Juan asked in confusion after trying to synchronize with Zhang Xiaobao's thinking pace yet found that she had no way of doing so.

"You don't understand this then. Don't look at how simple it was when I spoke of it. To really get a grasp of it requires so many years of experience. I'll give you an example. I seem to remember that it was France that saw that Germany had telescopes so they wanted to make them. In the end, they discovered that the telescopes they made had air bubbles. They paid a huge price to finally exchange

for the technique. This technique only had two words—grind & polish. The taste of being baked dry and grilled dry aren't the same. Pickled and not pickled is also not the same. We here don't have marine fish so the issue of saltiness is fundamental. I need money to open the markets. I want to mass produce fish strips to go to the large areas for a free promotion. The things we got in barter in the early phase, I want to directly convert to money to go buy more fish. The time is too long. I don't want to wait. I don't need to say what time is, right?" Zhang Xiaobao explained patiently.

Wang Juan looked into those pitch-black eyes of Zhang Xiaobao, almost imagining momentarily that she had been sucked inside. Nodding, she said: "I was previously dubbed a genius by others. Now, I finally understand. Any coincidence is an inevitability. For you to be able to become an International Criminal Swindler was not mere trickery. To tell the truth, I am a bit envious of the education within the prisons. It's like what some people have said before—the gathering point of geniuses, besides the research universities, is in the prisons."⁷

The conversation between the both of them used lip speech. They didn't think much of it but the pressure on Erniu was very great. He thought that Little Mister was preparing to give up on him. Thinking of his family's future living, thinking of his parents, at this moment, he finally gritted his teeth as he resolved his mind: "Little Mister, I will do as you [honorific] say. I'll talk. I'll go talk with Mistress. Big deal—it's only a single life."

Erniu's words caused Zhang Xiaobao to feel surprise. He originally did plan to give up on Erniu. It wasn't not permitting him to follow but a decision to not let him come in contact with

any important matters in the future. Now, upon hearing Erniu's words, the original idea of abandonment eased. He asked: "Why?"

"For my Dad and Mom. I trust Little Mister that you [honorific] will definitely let me make lots of money. I've always wanted to let my Dad and Mom have meat to eat for every meal and good clothing to wear. I'll put my all into it." Erniu honestly replied.

"Good child. That's right. You're not bad. Follow me from now on." Zhang Xiaobao praised him. He forgot that he himself was the genuine child right now.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang was the same as before, coming over at the time that the children needed to have milk. She fully fed the two children, one at each side, watching the two kids fall asleep. She was just about to go out the door to busy herself with her own matters but discovered that Erniu who usually hid far away was actually blocking the door today.

"Erniu, is there anything you need to tell me? Is it about Baolang and Juan-Juan?" Mrs. Zhang-Wang glanced over Erniu as she lightly asked.

Erniu had already drank a bit of wine and was currently brewing up the nerve. He had thought he could directly face Mistress to speak but then upon hearing Mistress ask him, that little bit of courage built up by the wine was suddenly gone. He bowed his head to stare at his feet, timidly saying: "No, nothing, Mistress. You [honorific] walk well."

“Unh, take good care of Xiaobao and Juan-Juan and you won’t be ill-treated later on.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang made a sound in confirmation, then moved to walk away into the distance.

Erniu froze there. Thinking, he used his hand to forcefully pinch his own thigh before he finally mustered up the courage again and loudly said: “Mistress, please wait. I, I have words to speak.”

“Unh? Speak of what?” Mrs. Zhang-Wang stopped, slowly turning around to ask while staring at Erniu.

Erniu at this time knew he no longer had any path of retreat. Letting the sweat freely flow down his forehead, he gulped and stammered as he said: “Miss, Mistress, I, I want to, with you [honorific], talk, talk about, deal, business. Unh, right, it’s talk, talk business.”

“Oh? You said you wanted to talk business with me? Good, Erniu has promise. Speak. What business do you want to talk about? Buying yourself back?” Mrs. Zhang-Wang was puzzled. She didn’t know what illness had struck this Erniu today to even want to discuss business with her. What a joke! What qualifications did he have? The sale-bond item⁸ was still in her hands.

“No, not me. It’s, it’s my family. My family wasn’t sold. My parents as well as my [Older] Bro Daniu and my younger sister are still all peasants. My family’s business, grilled fish strips, the ones sold in the surrounding area in these past few days, our manor still doesn’t have these grilled fish strips. Talk, talking about this.” Erniu tried his best to not let himself be so afraid, trembling as he spoke.

“Grilled fish strips? You said fish strips? Could it be that it is your family that made them? What gall! Your family are peasants from our manor. The things that you made, why have you not first spoken of it for me to hear?” Mrs. Zhang-Wang scolded angrily.

Notes:

[1\]](#) A bit nonsensical even in the original Chinese but Xiaobao is mockingly referring to the mooning looks that Erniu is apparently giving Yingtao.

[2\]](#) You know the opposite of the English expression, “hard to get?” Erniu is described as doing the complete opposite. “Fan jian” (犯賤) literally translates to “commit cheap” and describes when people debase themselves by fawning or sucking up to people whose attention they want to receive, essentially throwing themselves away for cheap without any sign of self-respect in their behavior. This expression is similar to “fan cuo” (犯錯), which means to commit a wrong or to err, and “fan fa” (犯法) meaning to break the law, so there’s the implied connotation of a crime against oneself in this phrase.

[3\]](#) The fish strips are likely similar to beef jerky so Erniu is rubbing the tougher ones to soften them up for Yingtao.

[4\]](#) I couldn’t find or think of an English expression that was a satisfying substitute for “xin zhong mei di” (心中沒底) so I translated it literally here. It basically means Erniu felt uneasy and his emotions were not grounded and thus there was uncertainty.

5] The phrase “shang bu liao tai” (上不了臺) is an expression that literally means “can’t go up the dais/platform” and is used to describe people or objects that are considered to be items that can’t be shown in public as they would be an embarrassment and a loss of face to those associated with them. It’s usually a derogatory description applied to people that are viewed as upstarts for daring to try to get above themselves in areas that they weren’t trained/educated for. Xiaobao is using this label here because Erniu doesn’t even dare to dream of being anything else besides a lowly servant, which is worse in his eyes.

6] I substituted “gao chu bu sheng han” (高處不勝寒) for the roughly equivalent English saying. The literal meaning of this phrase is “the heights cannot win over cold” and is customarily used as a metaphor for the emotional chill and loneliness that power can bring that not even its benefits can overcome. This saying is a quote taken from “[Shuidiao Getou](#)” (水調歌頭), a poem by the Song dynasty poet [Su Shi](#) (蘇軾).

7] Note that how the penal system in China is set up would likely be different from in the West. It is probably due to the political nature of some jail sentences and what is considered to be punishable offenses that the demographic makeup of the prisoners would be a great deal more eclectic than the Western stereotype of the convict or jailbird. That’s not to say that the inmate population in Western prisons aren’t themselves skilled, too.

8] Mrs. Zhang-Wang is referring to an indentured servitude bond or contract. Ancient China was similar to ancient Rome in that there was a permanent subclass of slaves and servants whose numbers were constantly in flux since people could be forcibly enslaved due to various reasons like with penal sentences, under

the prisoner of war system, from property seizures, or due to human trafficking but the source of the slaves could also be from those who willingly sold themselves into slavery as indentured servants in order to use the money of the sale to benefit their families or pay off debts, essentially mortgaging themselves to gain a monetary amount. This meant mechanisms to buy their freedom back also existed and the racism associated with slavery as practiced in the Americas was not as prevalent though classism was still a huge problem with this institution. Arguably, everyone was a slave to the emperor who could arbitrarily order their deaths so there was not as much taboo about slavery as an institution that violated human rights by treating people like property and what that entailed. It is likely why Chinese culture tended to view it as just another type of servitude. It was standard practice in ancient China to ensure that trusted and loyal servants legally sold themselves to the household or were born into families that had been under such an arrangement for generations as it was viewed as a form of vassalage rather than slavery. The slave or subservient status was a form of guarantee that protected the master in this case as an ancient form of a [NDA](#) since the confidentiality of the servants was literally ensured by the master having the legal power of life and death over them. The Chinese counterpart to the Western stereotype of the English butler that has served the lord of the manor in a position that had been passed down from father to son would be bound to the household in an indentured servitude arrangement that was usually for life and considered an honor or privilege. Sometimes, such loyal servants were granted the right to bear the household's surname as a display of how trusted and valued they were. This will be why in my translations, I will rarely use slave for the servants even if they technically were not free citizens and could be treated like property or abused by their masters because of the Chinese view that it was more servitude unless it is unequivocally a slavery situation where freedom was virtually impossible to gain like with war slaves, etc.

Chapter 8: Within The Plan Is Even More Oddity Within The Plan

Upon hearing Mistress' interrogation, Erniu didn't even think and directly kneeled down right there with a thump. He didn't dare face Mistress in the midst of a rage. He had thought of giving away Little Mister but then he suddenly realized that if he really did give away Little Mister, would Little Mister be punished? Of course not. Mistress would only praise Little Mister and would also praise him. The problem was after the praise, would he himself have a life? If Mistress didn't punish him, Little Mister could casually find a reason to let him die without a whole corpse.¹

Due to this, Erniu felt that the only thing he could do was to not make a sound while awaiting Mistress' wrath. Even if Mistress had others give him a beating, it would be good. As for explanations? How to speak of it? Could he say that it was Little Mister who deliberately told him not to sell the grilled strips in the two manors? Bear with it—assuming that Mistress wouldn't beat him to death.

“Tell me. Why did you not tell me those grilled fish strips are produced by your family? Really had not discovered before, our manor here actually had such a character. Earned quite a bit? What future plans do you have?” Upon seeing such a demeanor from Erniu, Mrs. Zhang-Wang also tried her best to control her own tone of voice as she slowly spoke.

“Mistress, I can't say. Even if you [honorific] beat me to death, I can't say. I can only say is that I, Erniu, and I, Erniu's family haven't done anything to be sorry for against Zhang Manor.

Mistress, you [honorific] later on will certainly know this. I, Erniu, will die for the sake of the Manor but won't even think of harming the Manor. I'm just talk, talking business." Erniu knelt on the ground, forcefully clenching his fists together, his face already flowing with tears. But he was even like this and he still did not sell out Zhang Xiaobao.

At this moment, Zhang Xiaobao was lying on top of the couch and upon clearly hearing these words, he actually laughed. Wang Juan also heard them and seeing Zhang Xiaobao's expression, angrily said: "Why don't you step forward to save him? You're laughing. Do you think Erniu stupid, that he should be mocked?"

"Fart,² when have I ever mocked Erniu? From now on, Erniu will be my family. I'm laughing because I, Zhang Xiaobao, had people willing to die for me in my previous lifetime and even now in this lifetime, I will have them still. Worth it for me. From now on, Erniu will be my dear brother. When he's living, I'll have him enjoy glory and wealth; he dies, I'll help him take care of his family. You'd have me go out. If I really went out, how could I face Erniu?" Zhang Xiaobao suddenly spoke an obscenity as he stood up from the couch, his smile not changing but his little fists were tightly clenched.

"A swindler like you could actually also acquire the hearts of people? I don't believe it." Wang Juan was a bit jealous. Her data, if Zhang Xiaobao wanted to know it, he could. But Zhang Xiaobao's whereabouts, it could only be exposed after he did it himself. This difference really was too great.

"Humph! You don't believe it? I'll tell you. On that day, up until

the final minute before the explosion, if I wanted to run, I could still escape. I didn't call for them but my brothers were all already in position. If I just made a hand gesture or a move, the team of 6 snipers that your side had in place would immediately be knocked out. It was only that my life didn't have that much time left and I didn't want to harm you guys.

Don't assume that you guys are so powerful. I'll tell you that in your team, there were some people who, compared to Erniu, were nothing. Erniu still knows his standing, still knows loyalty. That person amongst you had already sold his soul. Not all people are you, Wang Juan, and not all people can become a Tyrant Flower."

Zhang Xiaobao was now finally angry as he ruthlessly spoke to Wang Juan. He also had his bottom line that no other person was allowed to touch.

Wang Juan was already muddled. It wasn't that she hadn't thought that the team had traitors but she just wasn't willing to believe it. At this time, the little bit of hope left in her heart had been destroyed. She naturally understood the meaning within Zhang Xiaobao's words. She didn't hate Zhang Xiaobao and she didn't hate the person that had sold her out. After all, she couldn't demand that everyone be just like her. She was only a bit envious. Zhang Xiaobao who was nothing more than a swindler, on what basis could he have such good brothers? Based on what?

The two of them nursed their respective attitudes in thought while outside, Erniu and Mrs. Zhang-Wang were also having their confrontation.

“You really won’t talk?” Mrs. Zhang-Wang, emphatically pausing after each word.

“Beat me to death and I still won’t talk.” Erniu stubbornly replied.

Wang Juan, who was still contemplating her thoughts within the room, nearly laughed out loud upon hearing Erniu’s words.

“Then, fine. Talk. How do you want to partner up?” Mrs. Zhang-Wang thought for a bit, turning her head to glance at the room that she had just walked out of as she asked.

“Mistress, give me another 2 guan [strings]. I’ll use it to buy fish and make fish strips. Then, I’ll take them to the other bustling areas to give away for free—especially to a high-grade restaurant. Five days later, I’ll return 50 guan [strings] to Mistress.” Erniu spoke according to the script that Zhang Xiaobao had set.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang smiled and nodded as she gently said to Erniu: “Erniu, you’ve always been a smart and sensible person in my house. Almost everyone thinks this. But I know you and am reassured about you, which is why I gave Xiaobao and Juan-Juan to you to care for. Since you want this money, then I’ll give it to you. If there can be 50 guan [strings], then let there be 50 guan [strings]. Even if there’s a loss, it’s nothing. Don’t think too much of it. For your Mom to have a son such as you, she must be happy. I think your Mom also knows your character—just like me.”

“It’s over. My Mom knows.” Zhang Xiaobao faintly said as he

stood on top of the couch.

“Unh, a mother knows her son best.”³ Wang Juan, who had simultaneously heard Mrs. Zhang-Wang speak, agreed as well.

“My Mom spoke these words for me to hear, ~ne.” Zhang Xiaobao smiled.

“Then, why are you still so happy?” Wang Juan asked.

“Why aren’t I happy? My Mom is so smart—of course, I have a reason to be happy. My Dad, that bookworm, lucked out.” Zhang Xiaobao directly flopped down with a thump from where he stood as he lay at Wang Juan’s side as he said to Wang Juan who was unhappy with his action: “Today is the happiest day for me. I found a good brother and also know the degree to which a mother’s love can be great.”

“To what degree?” Wang Juan really had no way of understanding.

“To the degree of unconditionally supporting their child. Listen, my Mom will definitely promise it. This makes me recall something written in a book somewhere. Those who are mothers, although they clearly know their own child could get burned boiling water, will still unconditionally support it. She’ll secretly watch. If there’s danger, she’ll immediately rush over to grab the water kettle rather than let her child get burned.” Zhang Xiaobao said sentimentally.

“What is that? The nobility and greatness of man is only because of this?” Wang Juan was still refuting Zhang Xiaobao. Even though she was already touched, she still wouldn’t admit defeat.

“Wrong. Not just humans. Even animals are also the same. If you’ve seen hunters go hunting, you’ll understand. Those animals that chewed off their own legs to escape the clamps will definitely be female, if only because they need to return to feed their children.” Zhang Xiaobao spoke thus.

“Don’t speak to me of such uselessness. I don’t like listening to it.” Wang Juan turned her head, not wanting Zhang Xiaobao to see her own red eyes. She was missing her family from the previous life again.

“Fine, I won’t speak. Just listen.” Zhang Xiaobao was thankful to God; he finally had parents in this lifetime.

“Yingtao, come here. Take this money. When it’s time, give it to Erniu to use.” From outside, Mrs. Zhang-Wang called out toward the room. Yingtao immediately ran out to receive that wooden piece that represented 2 guan [strings] of cash.

“Erniu, you stand up as well. Remember my words. I trust that you can take good care of Baolang. In a while, go to the accounting room to get some meat. Go home to eat a good meal.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang took out another wooden piece to throw to Erniu who was still kneeling there before slowly walking away.

As if waking up from a dream, Erniu trembled as he picked up the wooden piece, not able to speak as he watched the silhouette of Mistress in the distance.

It was just like Zhang Xiaobao said. When conscientious people saw that fish strips made money, imitations immediately appeared. The price was a bit cheaper but sales were not as good. One was not evenly salted. Another fish strip had no way of being grilled to the degree that Erniu's family had as they could not control the temperature as well.

Upon getting the money, Erniu instantly started buying great amounts of raw fish according to Zhang Xiaobao's instructions and then had the fish strips produced sent to a few restaurants for people to freely sample.

Five days later, the free supply of grilled fish strips to each restaurant was suddenly gone. This stuff, men actually didn't like to eat. As tasty as they were, they weren't as good as marinated beef for wine appetizers. But children and women liked them. These two kinds of people were simply too important—important to the point that any man of a normal sexual orientation couldn't not consider.

The 5 days of free samples, which gave the wine-houses a taste of the sweet rewards afterwards, necessitated that they prudently consider the financial benefits—or rather, the amount of profit—brought by this stuff. The most direct one was with the brothels. The women there were plentiful and had already made the grilled fish strips a type of essential snack food. Secondly were the men seeking a woman who couldn't help bringing some back to seek the

beauty's favor. Finally were the people with children who, when eating and drinking themselves, discovered that children liked this stuff and would also bring some back. They would then throw it to the child with a stern face while speaking two lecturing sentences full of harsh words—this was the depth of fatherly love.

But now, the supply had suddenly stopped. Those that had appeared in other places differed too much from these—just the balance of salt itself could not be compared with. The restaurant owners were all frantic now as they asked around for the place that made these fish strips, trying to figure it out.

Erniu had been constantly obeying Little Mister's orders as if by remote control. Upon seeing many people inquire, he had his big brother come out to hold the talks with a bidding war to sell the recipe. In reality, there was only one and that was to pickle or the process by which marine fish were cured. Such a simple thing before being publicly disclosed could let people crave it so endlessly. But after someone spent 120 silver taels⁴ to obtain it, they could only keep the dismay they felt in their heart to themselves.

“Didn't I tell you to ask for copper coins? Yet, you insist on bringing back so much silver. You tell me—if I want to buy a bit of stuff, you'd use silver to pay the bill? If I buy 200 catty⁵ of soybeans, do you want to take out this big piece of silver to look for an illness?⁶ How would you let me speak of you? If I want to sell tofu right now, should I watch you get out some silver to go buy some? You want to constantly pay with silver for business in the future? You yourself may feel like you're tired of living but don't drag me along to die with you!”

Zhang Xiaobao looked at the small pile of silver that Erniu placed in front of him, smacking his forehead as he spoke. But seeing that sorry expression of Erniu's, he knew that this deed had been done by Daniu. So he could only sigh as he had Erniu first take the money back to his mother there for repayment and have the remainder be gradually exchanged for copper coins in order to better execute the next step of the plan.

Notes:

1] Due to the Chinese belief in [ancestor worship](#), a lot of beliefs were associated with the afterlife. This resulted in various funerary rites requiring having a whole and pristine (i.e. undamaged) corpse upon death. A good funeral was considered necessary for a good afterlife. Anything that resulted in the mutilation of a corpse or not being able to be properly buried (and thus worshipped by descendants) could lead to a fate worse than death such as becoming a hungry wandering ghost with amnesia. Hence, this cultural belief leads to the hyperbole that Erniu expresses of his fear of what he could face if he betrayed Xiaobao's confidence. Coincidentally, capital punishments in China were ranked in terms of preference to the sufferer based on the state that it left the corpse in. This is why ancient Chinese history typically had a lot of forced suicides by poison or hanging for the political losers who were of noble, royal, or imperial status because it was a privilege that accorded them a "respectful death" by leaving them a whole corpse. Beheading, which was the normal method of execution for commoners sentenced to the death penalty, was thus one of the worse ways to die. An infamous example of one of the cruel and unusual punishments is the "[death by a thousand cuts](#)," which was usually awarded to those who had done serious offenses above and beyond the crimes (or one who

had run greatly afoul of someone in a high position of power). Not only was it a physical torture that made for a painful death but it was also a mental torture for the victim since it would leave their corpse in a mutilated state, running the risk of dooming them to a horrible afterlife.

[2\]](#) Exclaiming “fart” or “fang pi” (放屁) in Chinese expression is similar to saying “Shit!” or “Crap!” in English. It is a bit rude and vulgar. Although not an obscenity that rates as high as fuck or damn, it is similar in impact to saying hell or damn.

[3\]](#) Wang Juan is referencing an expression that originates from an anecdotal parable of “Da Kuang” (大匡), a chapter from [Guanzi](#) (管子), which was a philosophical text from the [Spring and Autumn Period](#) of Chinese history that was credited to [Guan Zhong](#) (管仲) from whose surname the title is derived. The original quote is “zhi zi mo ruo fu” (知子莫若父), which means “a father knows his son best.” Here, Wang Juan modified it so the “father” becomes “mother.” For those interested to know, the parable that the adage is based on is about the Chancellor of the state of Yue, [Fan Li](#) (范蠡). His second son had committed a crime in the state of Chu that he was arrested and sentenced to death for. To save him, Fan Li wanted to send his youngest son with a bribe of 1,000 gold [taels](#) (an insanely high amount of money, even back then) and a letter to his friend, the Chancellor of Chu. Upon hearing that Fan Li had entrusted the youngest son with such a task, his eldest son was angry that Fan Li didn’t choose him for the job instead since it was simple and only needed him to be a messenger. Yet, Fan Li stated that only the youngest son could save the second son and that sending the eldest son would doom the second son to death. However, Fan Li ultimately wasn’t able to overcome his eldest son’s protests and gave in, letting the eldest son go, though Fan Li stressed that the eldest son had to leave behind the gift (bribe). The

eldest son initially followed along with the plan leading to the Chancellor of Chu saving Fan Li's second son by getting the King of Chu to give a blanket pardon to all death row criminals. However, after his younger brother was saved, Fan Li's eldest son then thought that the 1,000 gold [taels](#) had served its purpose and not wishing to be wasteful, returned for the gold. His taking back the gift (bribe) angered the Chancellor of Chu so much that he instigated the King of Chu into specifically ordering the execution of Fan Li's second son. Then, just as the execution ended, Fan Li's youngest son arrived with the coffin that had already been prepared. The reason for Fan Li's prescience was because he knew his sons too well since his eldest son had been born in poverty and was aware of the hardship behind their fortune while his youngest son was born in wealth and could thus give away 1,000 gold [taels](#) without batting an eye. So Fan Li knew that by sending his eldest son, the mission would end in failure and made provisions for it. Thus, Fan Li, as a father, knew his son best. By the way, this idiom is actually the first half of the actual quote. The second half is “zhi chen mo ruo jun” (知臣莫若君), which essentially means a ruler or lord knows his vassals best.

4] [Tael](#) or “liang” (兩) was a traditional Chinese unit of mass that was also a common way of measuring silver and gold currency (note that copper or bronze as a currency was never measured in [taels](#) but in coinage, reflecting the comparative value of silver and gold as precious metals in the ancient Chinese economy). Thus, this term frequently comes up as a monetary unit when discussing silver or gold denominations of currency in China. Similarly to the Western Imperial system of measurement with ounces and cups, the mass of a [tael](#) was 1/16 of a [catty](#), which was ~40 grams. However, the actual mass differed depending on the region and time era, making the actual mass of such currency variable. Mainland China reformed this unit into the “market [tael](#),” which is 50 grams or 1/10 of a market [catty](#).

5] [Catty](#) or “jin” (斤) was a traditional Chinese unit of mass whose measurements varied depending on the region or time era but was typically ~600 grams. It is often seen in marketplaces and shops that sell products by the price per weight. The market [catty](#), which is a modern mass unit used in modern China, was derived by rounding the [catty](#) down to 500 grams.

6] Xiaobao’s retort is making a pun out of “looking for change” into “looking for an illness,” alluding to how crazy paying for something like 200 [catty](#) of soybeans with a silver [tael](#) would be since it is similar to buying a loaf of bread with a \$100 bill. It would definitely raise eyebrows and draw notice.

Chapter 9: Earn Some Pocket Change To Be Able To Raise Chickens

Erniu obeyed Zhang Xiaobao and left to pay back the money. Mrs. Zhang-Wang was rather surprised, staring at Erniu as she asked: “How much did your family make this time? You didn’t borrow it from somewhere else to pay it back to me, right?”

“Mistress, how could I have anywhere to go to borrow so much money? It was all from what Little... this little one’s¹ family had earned.” Erniu wanted to say Little Mister in unconscious reply but it was a good thing that he was normally clever and at the critical juncture, held onto his control and distractedly foisted it all onto his own family.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang once again carefully glanced over Erniu as she slowly nodded: “Erniu, how much money did your family earn this time? In giving me 50 guan [strings], is there any remainder?”

“There is. This time, a total of 120 taels of silver was earned so there’s still 70 taels left, ~ne.” Even if Erniu was smart, he still couldn’t outmatch Mrs. Zhang-Wang. Completely ignorant of the deeper meaning behind Mistress’s questions, he blabbed the entirety of the truth.

“Oh? So profitable? Then, you repaid with silver. What you still have left in your hands are copper coins then?”

“No, it’s also silver. I forgot Little... this little one’s parents’ instructions. It would be good if it were to be exchanged into

copper coins. Now, it's really not easy to spend." Erniu also didn't know why but upon seeing Mistress, he would get scared so whenever he spoke, he was clumsy.

"If that's so, then I'll give you copper coins in exchange. After all, you're also a peasant of my Zhang Manor. To be able to make a profit is good—you have promise." Mrs. Zhang-Wang completely took care of Erniu's problem.

Erniu didn't even think there were any problems at all and used a small cart to haul the 70 guan [strings] of copper cash back. Upon seeing Zhang Xiaobao, he happily said: "Little Mister, there's no need to think of another method. Just now, Mistress actually exchanged the silver on my hands into copper coins. It's all good now. Didn't even realize that Mistress was this easy to talk to. Little Mister? Little Mister? You [honorific] don't stare blankly. I've hauled the money back."

Erniu kept speaking, only to discover Little Mister's eyes were gazing outside, not moving one bit. A bit worried, he reached out a hand to wave in front of Zhang Xiaobao's face.

"Oh, fine. Erniu, is your Mom's teeth still fine?" Zhang Xiaobao suddenly asked.

"Not that good. My Dad said that it was all to blame on when Mom was young. She lost quite a few teeth so she doesn't like eating tough things." Erniu had no way of following along with Zhang Xiaobao's pace so he just answered whatever he was asked.

“The teeth are bad so eating meat is troublesome? Come, Erniu, I’ll teach you a method. Go back and make it for your Mom to eat. Prepare a copper basin that’s this large. Or you can make an item according to how I draw it for you using copper.” Zhang Xiaobao completely didn’t consider the issue of money and directly started drawing on the ground a basin that was hollow in the middle with a tube that bulged out. Under the tube was a mesh that he explained as being made out of iron wiring.

“Make this item. Put charcoal in the center area and the charcoal debris can be taken out from the bottom. Put in seasoning that you think can be placed in there. Add lard. In addition, use a stove to cook some wheat flour in a pot. Cook it until it’s thickened. Exchange it with twice the amount of water. Place the water into the stuff from before. Wait until the water boils, then put in the lamb meat to cook. Take it out once the color changes and give it to your Mom to eat. She definitely will be able to chew it—as tender as poached meat.²

In a while, go back to find people to make it. It’s best if you find different people to make different parts. Keep it secret. Absolutely don’t reveal it. Make an additional one—unh, two—send it to my Mom as well as Juan-Juan’s Mom while telling them how to use it. Emphasize the secrecy, understand?” Zhang Xiaobao pointed at the drawing on the ground as he spoke to Erniu.

“Understood, Little Mister. You [honorific] rest assured. Beat me dead and I won’t talk. Little Mister, why are you [honorific] also buttering up my Mom?” Erniu asked in a daze.

“What words are you saying? What is this buttering up your

Mom that you're talking about?³ This is to let you treat your Mom a bit better. Don't ask. Just go back to make the stuff for your Mom to eat according to how I said so. Now, let's begin talking about the main business. Know anyone who makes ceramics?" Zhang Xiaobao continued asking.

While Erniu was pondering this, to the side, Wang Juan used lip speech to say to Zhang Xiaobao: "Your Mom [modern] treats you so well. Knowing you can't easily use silver to spend with, she exchanged it all for copper coins. She even found an excuse that she thought was reasonable, not wanting to let you know. Being a Mom [modern] really isn't easy.

I'll say something honestly so don't be unhappy. I now find it a bit fortunate—how fortunate that your parents are gone. Otherwise, you would definitely seek out your parents. If it really came to that point, what if your parents from that lifetime had been laid off or bullied? A rainstorm of blood⁴ would definitely be launched right there. Just get scared thinking about it. You know that the state you're in is sick, right?"

"You're not sick? I pray that your Mom [modern] from that world will be smashed dead by a car tomorrow." Zhang Xiaobao's lips moved.

Wang Juan was just like a man-eating wolf as she fiercely threw herself at Zhang Xiaobao, using her hand to choke his neck as she said lowly: "You want to repeat yourself for me to hear? I'll bite you to death."

“See? And you call me sick. You’re not better than that, you know? We’re the same type of people. From now on, don’t cross my bottom line. Yes, knowing that it was my Mom giving me support with no reservations, I just now thought of Erniu’s Mom, wanting to use his hands to give my Mom and your family members a little benefit. I don’t feel that I did wrongly. You can say that I have no internal defenses when it comes this type of familial feeling but you shouldn’t insult me.” Zhang Xiaobao didn’t struggle one bit. A little brat that was only as big as Wang Juan wanted to choke him to death? That was essentially impossible.

“So you speak of my Mom [modern]? Fine, I’ll temporarily forgive you. Don’t speak to me again of whatever words of do not do unto others what you do not want wish for yourself.⁵ Continue making your hot pot.”⁶ Wang Juan actually just wanted to make Zhang Xiaobao not be so juvenile since once he was dealing with the people in his family, he was missing that kind of toughness only to suddenly discover that she herself was the same. Moodily climbing up, she stood to the side once again.

Erniu was freaked out. He had wanted to pull [them apart] before yet didn’t dare to. Seeing that the two little ancestors were finally apart, he repeatedly gasped for breath before he could restore his emotional equilibrium. Thinking of the question Little Mister just asked, he replied: “I can find people who make ceramics. Little Mister, what do you [honorific] want to make?”

“Make stuff—make different kinds of fine little jars. Don’t want them to be too big. If they can only hold 4 taels of water, it’s fine. It should be so that 4 jars all together can hold 1 catty. The prettier, the better. How are the mountain chili sprouts that your family have gathered?” Zhang Xiaobao regained composure as he spoke to

Erniu.

“Gathered quite a few. Little Mister, how much do you [honorific] actually want? This money is to be used to make ceramics jars?” Erniu finally realized now that in front of a child that had barely even reached 1 year of age, he himself was pretty much a simpleton as he had no way of knowing what it was that Little Mister was actually thinking. If it weren’t for the over 100 silver taels earned at once this time, he would have supposed that he really was accompanying children on a lark.

“Continue gathering it. It’s best to have other people help gather it. You can use money to buy it—the more, the better. Even if the surrounding mountains are completely harvested, it’s fine. Do it this way—1 wen [cash] for every 3 catties. Have the children who don’t have anything to do go gather them.” Over there, not waiting for Zhang Xiaobao to speak, Wang Juan already gave the order. She at least understood this small stuff.

“1 wen [cash] per 3 catties?” Erniu asked with eyes widened.

“Why, the money is too little?” Wang Juan was a bit unsure.

“Too much. You can find a whole plot of that stuff up on the mountain. Just randomly letting a child go up the mountain can return 40-50 catties in a day.” Even Erniu wanted to rush up the mountain to go gather them right now.

“Ah? That much? Then, it’ll be a bit more—1 wen [cash] to buy 5 catties. I can’t lower it any more but I can adjust the method of

acquisition. Collect 300 catties at one time. This way, when the mountain chili sprouts have been gathered till their numbers have started getting lower and lower, there will still be people going to pick them. There won't be any money to earn if they can't gather enough of 300 catties." This kind of small matter Wang Juan herself could handle. It didn't even require Zhang Xiaobao, that big swindler.

Up to now, Erniu was still unclear as to what Little Mister and the Wang Family's Little Miss were thinking inside but he still nodded in confirmation. After all, he was considered to be a clever type of person, too. He understood that he himself didn't have to know a lot of things but there was one thing that he absolutely had to be able to accomplish and that was loyalty—to do whatever they had him do.

Waiting until Erniu left in acceptance of his orders, Wang Juan was a bit worried again and asked Zhang Xiaobao: "Having Erniu's single family work on such a large matter? Why not divide it and let Yingtao also work on it a bit?"

"How big of a deal can it be? How come I haven't found this matter to be that important? It's nothing more than a bit of pocket change. Yingtao has some other things to do. I don't expect to rely on a single item to make a fortune. I want to endlessly produce little items and earn a bit with each one. Once you add them all together, it'll naturally be a lot. Yingtao, come here. There's something to discuss."

Zhang Xiaobao had an appearance of not caring while he spoke, calling out to Yingtao who was still vigilantly looking outside.

“Little Mister, you [honorific] were looking for me?” Yingtao also knew about the money Erniu had made these past couple of days. 70 taels, ~ah! A tenth was 7 silver taels, which was enough to match a few years of the salary, if not fined, she would have received. Her family was also of the manor. Who didn’t wish to make some money for their family? She deftly ran over here.

“Come, I’ll draw something for you. You watch.” Zhang Xiaobao took up that wooden stick to start drawing on the ground again.

“Little Mister, what thing is this?” Yingtao asked as she looked at the drawing.

“This is called a kang [bed-stove].”⁷

“Kang [bed-stove]? What is it used for?”

“This thing’s function is huge. It’s most useful in the winter. It can also be used now. You wait for Erniu to return and get money from him. Buy chicken eggs—buy the kind that was laid by a hen that was bred to a rooster. Try your best not to rock those eggs. My family’s courtyard also has chicken. You look to see which chicken is brooding. Get someone to hold the chicken down and then stretch a hand inside to feel that temperature.

Wait until the kang [bed-stove] has been built. Then, you place the collected chicken eggs on top of the kang [bed-stove]. Use something to cover it. Fire it—when the temperature is around the

same as when under the chicken's body will be fine. Oh, also, the eggs you collect, you should try to collect those where one end is rounded and one end is pointed. Both ends that are rounded can be collected, too. Forget about the ones where both ends are pointed."

Yingtao blinked her eyes once she understood. Little Mister wanted her to produce chicks without needing to brood by directly using this kang [bed-stove]. If this really could be figured out... Madness—how many people would go mad?

Zhang Xiaobao could care less how many people would go crazy as he continued drawing and then said: "Yingtao, look here. Make a small plate. Get some mirrors and arrange them. Place a candle inside the area these mirrors are surrounding. Then, candle⁸ it. Look at the chicken egg as you hold it in your palm. Candle it once every 5 or 6 days. Keep the ones that are dark in color. Take out the ones where the colors are reversed. Don't discard them. Give them to me. I still have a use for them. After 12 or 13 days, candle it once again. Look at the skeletal silhouette inside... Forget it. Let's not speak of this. You wouldn't understand. Just keep the large majority of the same kind. Take out the ones that are different and don't dispose of them. Give them to me. I can still use them."

Yingtao nodded, memorizing the words that Zhang Xiaobao spoke before she excitedly stood to leave. She was a bit dazed. This Little Mister was really too unlike ordinary people. With all the matters he spoke of, anyone would get muddled.

"You want to hatch chicks? Candle the eggs? What's the meaning of the roundedness and pointedness?" Wang Juan waited until Yingtao had left, slightly tilting her head as she looked at Zhang

Xiaobao.

“A genuine egg candling expert can directly sort out the male and female. This, I can’t do. Usually, the rounded ones are female and the pointed ones are male; the probability is in there. In this time period, chicken is actually inferior to the ox or sheep. Thus requiring the next step of my plan, teaching others how to eat chicken and the different ways of eating it. We’ll raise chicken and even be able to earn a bundle. After adding up one bundle to another bundle, you’ll discover that it’s a tremendous figure.” Zhang Xiaobao said while blinking his eyes.

“Something’s wrong. You, Zhang Xiaobao, could possibly only use this to earn a single bundle of money? Then, you wouldn’t be Zhang Xiaobao. Talk. What other plans do you have? Your smile isn’t the type of smile a normal person would have. What particular detail is there about the chicken eggs that get sorted out?” Wang Juan didn’t trust that this International Criminal Swindler didn’t have a backup move. If that truly was so, then it could become a World Wonder.

Zhang Xiaobao used that fat little hand to scratch at his sparse hair as he deliberately feigned a coy smile: “You found me out again. The Heavens, ah! Great Earth, ah! Why place a cop right by my side, ~ah? Actually, there isn’t. It’s that I’m preparing to use that chicken to trade for oxen and horses. My family are landowners after all. Farming without oxen or horses won’t do.

Regarding those candled eggs and balut⁹ eggs, I’m going to use them to trick people—no, to help people. First, I’ll use lamb stew and fish stew to cook them with, adding a lot of scallions. After

they're cooked, I'll grill them with the juices made out of those mountain chili sprouts along with some other things. There's an effect where it increases blood circulation. People with cardiovascular diseases shouldn't eat it. When healthy men eat it, they'll discover that they're just a bit impulsive. It involves the thing that you wanted to touch to expose me. If you don't understand, it can be sold for money and not only that, it can be sold for a lot of money. You understand?"

"Hooligan." Wang Juan said.

Notes:

[1\]](#) Erniu uses “xiao de” (小的) as a way to humbly refer to himself in the third person. Again, referring to oneself in the third person is completely normal in Chinese though it can appear awkward sounding in English.

[2\]](#) The original text uses “bai zhu rou” (百煮肉) or “hundred-cooked meat,” which is a little nonsensical if you consider Xiaobao's instructions, especially since there is only twice-cooked or [double cooked pork](#) in Chinese cuisine. It is likely a typo since it is a homophone for a Beijing dish that is called “bai zhu rou” ([白煮肉](#)) or “white cooked meat,” which is a dish that uses [poaching](#) in its preparation just like the Sichuan dish, “[shui zhu rou](#)” (水煮肉), which means “water-cooked meat.” By the way, the “white” part is likely referring to the poaching if you consider that plain boiled water is actually called “bai kai shui” (白開水) in Chinese—literally, “white open water.”

[3\]](#) The reason for Xiaobao's reaction to Erniu's unwitting turn of phrase is because “hao shang” (好上), which I have translated as

“butter up” and literally means “good up” can have gossipy connotations since it’s generally used in the context of people getting together in relationships, making Erniu’s word choice unfortunate.

[4\]](#) I translated “xing xue feng xue” (腥風血雨), which reads as “raw/fishy wind, blood rain,” as literally as possible though Google Translate evidently thinks that it should be “reign of terror” (not going to lie, that would also be an accurate description of Xiaobao’s response in Juan-Juan’s hypothetical situation). This is an expression that’s usually applied to tumultuous and conflict-filled situations like military coup d’états or palace conspiracies. I like double-checking my translations against Google Translate for readability, which sometimes leads to hilarity, and Chinese dictionaries for accuracy, which adds to the length of my footnotes.

[5\]](#) Wang Juan is actually quoting the version of the [Golden Rule](#) from Confucius’ Analects, “yi suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren” (己所不欲, 勿施於人), which is sometimes referred to as the Silver Rule for its double negative.

[6\]](#) [Hot pot](#) or “huo guo” (火鍋) is also called steamboat though it literally translates to “fire pot.” It is a Chinese dish that uses a pot (usually metal) filled with constantly simmering stew in which ingredients are dunked into and cooked before being eaten with dipping sauces. It is typically eaten during the winter. For those more familiar with the Japanese variants, think of [shabu-shabu](#) or [sukiyaki](#). [Fondue](#) using a spicy stew or flavored soup is likely the closest equivalent you could get in Western cuisine.

7] A “[kang](#)” (炕) is a type of [hypocaust](#) or [underfloor heating](#) that takes the form of a brick platform that is heated by an attached stove or hearth. It can be used as a bed and is normally installed in houses located in the colder, wintry regions of China in the north. The [ondol](#) is the Korean variant of the same concept.

8] Xiaobao uses the word “zhao” (照), which means to illuminate, shine, or reflect here. But since he is describing the practice of [candling](#), I chose to use the English verb here.

9] [Balut](#) [warning: NSFW images] is actually the name of a street food sold in the Philippines that was likely adopted from the Chinese dish Xiaobao is referring to here called “mao dang” (毛蛋), which literally means “fur/hair egg.” A balut is a boiled egg containing a stillborn bird embryo that is peeled and then eaten. Needless to say, it is an acquired taste for people (it has been the subject of some food challenges on some reality and variety shows). However, there is the belief that consuming it has medicinal properties that are similar to the aphrodisiac effect attributed to oysters or deer.

Chapter 10: Striving For The Sake Of Honor

Erniu and Yingtao both had things to do. At the moment, there was no one to take care of Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan. So Mrs. Zhang-Wang sent over Shiliu, the one who had helped her hold up the umbrella from before.

It was afternoon. Under the great sun, in the middle of a courtyard with a ground manually blanketed with sand, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were currently striving with great effort to walk on top of it. Children sweated very little but even so, though their two foreheads were glistening and the thin clothing on their bodies had been changed once already, the both of them still did not intend to return to sleep.

“Shiliu, water.” Zhang Xiaobao stopped, raising his arm to wipe the sweat off his brow as he called out to Shiliu who was worriedly watching next to him. Shiliu had been watching them. She couldn’t imagine why these two children were doing this walking back and forth on this floor of sand for—not speaking of normal children who were willing to do so themselves, even if adults forced them to, they would already be crying by now. Upon hearing the call, she hastily handed over the water that had been placed to the side.

As she watched the two children chug the water down over there, Shiliu could not figure it out why they didn’t drink perfectly good tea or sugar water but insisted on drinking some salty water. She had tasted this water before. It wasn’t nice to drink at all. Drinking it felt a bit of brackish—salty but not salty, mild but not mild. Yet, Little Mister specified that he must have this type of water. Drinking salty water, wouldn’t that make you thirstier the more

you drank it?

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan didn't know what Shiliu was thinking about as they half-filled their stomach with salty water before sighing in relief together and getting up again to walk towards the front.

“Endure it. Today, there's still 200 meters. That's only 5 round trips. Grit your teeth and it'll be over. This is a rare chance.” As he was walking on top of the sand, Zhang Xiaobao's calves started to uncontrollably tremble. Today, the mission of the two of them was to walk 500 meters. For adults, 500 meters was like nothing. But for two children who had just reached 1 year of age, in the sand, it was an excessive load.

“I know. Children aren't willing to train when they're wrong but when they wish to train after growing up, it's too late. Our sort with childish bodies and adult determination is the best opportunity for training. I trust that with practice like this, you would have no problem jumping down from 20 meters in time. But I reckon that there will be no way to read at night. Probably won't have a bit of energy left at all.” Wang Juan was suffering equally, falling as she spoke before slowly climbing back up herself.

“Still have to though. Making a contract or whatever later on, if we don't recognize the characters and understand the classical quotes,¹ we could eat a great loss.² The large majority of characters, I can still recognize and can even write a portion. After all, I did spend a period of time on the island.³⁴ But literary quotes, I can't do. I thought about tricking people all day, how would I have time to think of all that?” Zhang Xiaobao grinned,

watching Wang Juan climb back up without showing any intention of helping her up.

Wang Juan finally climbed back up, pulling on Zhang Xiaobao's hand once again as they moved forward together. A large area of her small face was tanned completely red but she was also not willing to give up and said: "Unh, learn it. Even if I have to lie there, I still want to learn it, too. I was a genius back then. Ma,⁵ ~ah! It's more tiring than when I was at the Special Ops Unit. There isn't even anyone to give us massages or scientific instructions.⁶ Quickly, get to the front. There are still 4 and a half laps. Let's be tired for 2 days and then, it'll be better later on."

"Quit dreaming. Once we've adjusted to this intensity, then we'll have to draw up a new training program. Endure it. If one wishes to show off in front of people, then one must suffer in back of people.⁷ Who made us be unlike others, ~ne?"

Zhang Xiaobao also staggered on his feet and as his hand loosened, fell down. He opened his mouth to spit out sand before pulling on Wang Juan's hand to get up. The both of them were holding hands but not responsible for when the other fell—it was only for being able to better control their balance. If a fall was due to physical ability, then they didn't heed the other. The strong didn't need the pity of others.

In a room from which the situation here could be seen, a man and woman stood by the window. The two people held back tears as they watched the babies fall and climb back up, fall and climb back up again over there.

“Qiao-er, is this still my son? From hearing you talk, the matter of that Erniu’s family should have been caused by Xiaobao. He’s still that little. He can’t be a monster,⁸ right?” The man asked doubtfully.

“What monster? That’s my son. When they’re that small, other people’s children naturally aren’t able to but my son is. Even if he’s more powerful than other children and you see scary areas, you still have to think: ‘This is a divine sage,⁹ not a monster.’ Whose family’s children can compare to Xiaobao? Before, while carrying him, I knew that in the future, my son would definitely be different from the majority. You saw how well I could eat back then—I could eat more than most men could in a single meal.”

Mrs. Zhang-Wang retorted, the words she spoke completely without reason. Anything about her own son, it was all good. A stumble was better looking than when other children stumbled. To be able to swallow a mouthful of sand and still not cry, which family’s child could do that?

The man was Zhang Xiaobao’s bookworm father. He had been hearing about too many strange matters lately that were all involving his own son so he found some time to come over with his wife to watch. But he didn’t think that he would actually see this kind of scene. Don’t speak of a small child—even an adult would have already hidden away from being baked by such a fiery sun.

But the reality told him that these two babies’ will were so resolute, it caused people fright. He wanted to rush over several times to pick up his son and thoroughly question his son on just

what he wanted to do. But he was held back by his wife once again. According to his wife's words, isn't it fine for the children to play? Other people wanted their child to move more and the child wouldn't move. How obedient, how good looking was their own child as those calves stepped up and down? What's to fear with a stumble? With the sand, there wasn't a bit of trouble. This sand had been sifted and re-sifted by people. It was all fine and wouldn't injure anyone.

Father Zhang¹⁰ thought of what his wife had said on the matter of the money that Erniu's family had made. Watching the two stubborn children in front of him, he somehow felt that it wasn't right. Hearing Qiao-er speak like this once again, he sighed as he said: "You're not scared that these two children were possessed by something? Whose children can be like this? Yingtao was also sent out to collect new chicken eggs—heard that the collection even had specifications in the choosing. Don't even know what they want to do. If it isn't fine, let's find a master¹¹ to check—can't let harm come to our own child."

"What monster? Can a monster call me Mom, call you Dad? Is your monster's heart that good? This is just talent. You didn't discover it before? Wasn't that belly of mine not the same as others?" Mrs. Zhang-Wang had managed the household for too long so her speech to her husband wasn't respectful like others were. She would say what was what. But it was all one meaning. Zhang Xiaobao was her own biological son. The son did things well and that was because the mother had given birth well.

"What area is there that's not the same? I see it as all the same. Which family could essentially eat that much?" Father Zhang felt that he himself had no way to communicate with his wife. If there

was just one mention of his son here, then it was that everything was all good.

“Husband, speak to this consort.¹² Which family’s pregnant-bellied wife did you [honorific] see was good? If they’re a poor, unfortunate family’s, let’s spend money to bring them here and let Husband see enough.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang asked, holding onto her temper.

Father Zhang really was scared when his wife was like this. Other people all had several women. But he himself sure was swell—this Wang Qiao-er and the Mistress from the Wang Manor over there had teamed up to protest as one. It was just as well that he himself was wholeheartedly seeking an honorary title¹³ so it was nothing. Now that he also had a son, then this single one would just be the one. If other women really entered the family, then he didn’t even know what huge issues would come out.

Yet, the Wang Manor’s brother had a daughter. If this next one was still a daughter, then could it be that he still couldn’t take on another room¹⁴ in there? Turning his head to look at that frost-filled face of Wang Qiao-er’s, he didn’t say anything, only sighed heavily.

Now, this was serious. His single sigh had been heard by Mrs. Zhang-Wang whose eyes immediately reddened and she began to sniffle, sobbing while she said: “When I was wed to you back then, what did you say? You said you would be good to only me. Now, ne? The sight of another person’s wife’s belly, you’ve already seen it, too. Furthermore, you insist on saying the son I birthed is a

monster. What sin did I do in my previous life, you?¹⁵ How did I open myself up to this sort of thing? I'm going to find Mom [in-law]. Divorce¹⁶ me! I'll bring my own monster son along with me."

"No, I didn't, I said nothing. I was just playing around, ~ne. Qiao-er, don't, don't cry. Your husband was wrong. It's son, our son, our divine sage son. Missus¹⁷ spoke correctly, our son is stronger than other people's—let them all be envious. Missus, don't be mad. You [honorific] look at our son. How good. Even the sound he makes choking on water is better than other people's children. Shiliu, if you don't even keep watch and allow Xiaobao to choke, I'll pluck your skin!"

Father Zhang had no resort, either. His Missus here said divorce yet it wasn't to let him divorce her but to go find some Mom [in-law]? That clearly was telling on him.¹⁸ He was already so old, if he was taught a lesson by Dad and Mom once again, then it wasn't worth it, ~ah. He was watching Xiaobao drinking water there at the time and wanted to praise two sentences to better distract from the matter that his Missus was fixated on but he didn't think that what he saw would be Xiaobao choking on water over there. Only once he finished praising did he react and all the heat he had just taken from his Missus, he took it all out on Shiliu.

Don't mention it but this one move was actually really useful. Upon hearing her man speak of the children, Mrs. Zhang-Wang's eyes instantly looked over. The tears were gone too. The sobbing sounds stopped as well. It wasn't until seeing that her son was fine that her heart was set at ease.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan heard the noise and simultaneously turned their heads, only to discover that there were people watching. It wasn't that the both of them had no vigilance. If it were before the practice, they would have already heard this little bit of disturbance. But right now, they were one after another tired till they wanted to die as their bodily functions had dropped incredibly low. To keep on standing and walking upright had already cost them all of their mental energy, how could they discover anything else?

“From now on, want to preserve a portion of stamina while training? Working like this really was too dangerous. We actually didn't discover people were monitoring us.” Wang Juan dumped the water on top of her head to lower the heat as she worriedly asked.

“There's no need. This isn't monitoring. This is loving concern. My Dad and Mom watching us still needs to be guarded against? In my own home's courtyard, who do I have to guard against? Not to mention, there wouldn't even be a bit of danger. Even if there suddenly were several people holding knives rushing over to kill us, would you have a way to avoid it? Train quickly. There are still 3 and half laps.” Zhang Xiaobao even took the leisure of waving a small hand toward his parents over there before turning around to move towards the front.

“All right. Even if I have to crawl, I'll finish crawling this distance.” Wang Juan squinted her eyes slightly, relaxing all of the muscles everywhere save for her legs, swaying as she followed.

Father Zhang and Mrs. Zhang-Wang saw their son was even

waving his hand at them. That dirty little face made people want to laugh and yet have no way of laughing out loud. Staring at that sandy ground of several zhang [yard]¹⁹ lengths, the two people both knew that this was the children challenging the extreme limits of their bodies.

“Missus, you spoke rightly. Which family’s children could be comparable to Xiaobao and Juan-Juan? They’re this small and can treat themselves with such ruthlessness. Once they get bigger, they’ll definitely be even more powerful.” Father Zhang said feelingly.

Notes:

¹ “Dian gu” (典故) usually translates to literary quotation or classical allusions. The individual meaning of the characters in this term is “text/code” (典) and “reason” (故). The reason why this is an issue that comes up is historically speaking, written Chinese was deliberately condensed and compressed in comparison to the spoken vernacular. This was due to the cumbersome weight of the bamboo or bone strips that were used for literary records before paper was invented (Yes, the Chinese had already experienced the agony of trying to write everything they wanted to write in as few characters as possible in prehistoric times way before Twitter ever came along). The need to pack as much information as possible on as few strips and characters as possible led to the habit of quoting extensively from existent text sources which likely led to a lot of the 4 or 8 character long idioms or couplets that summarize parables. The difficulty in publication and reverence of scholarship meant ancestral poets and authors that left behind a literary legacy were respected and constantly referenced in ancient China. This is similar to the role played by Shakespeare who is one of the, if not the absolute, most influential contributors to the written English

language. Native English speakers might be able to identify “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” for the meaning ascribed to it from its use in the scene from *Romeo and Juliet* but non-native speakers would likely not be aware of the allusion without research. So imagine written Chinese as having multiple Shakespeare-like poets and authors contributing their works as a pool of literary references that were then constantly quoted. This is not as much of an issue in modern times due to a loosening of linguistic traditions and increase in literacy rates that allowed people to write as plainly as they spoke instead of pursuing brevity, poeticness, and word play in all of their writing similarly to how English speakers no longer need to consider [iambic pentameter](#) or rhyming in their normal writing. Hence, this leads to Xiaobao’s current problem as the literary reference pool for modern-day Chinese writing would be a completely different animal than the one used for ancient Chinese writing. No memes, for one thing.

2] Xiaobao says “chi da kui” (吃大虧). I translated “chi kui” (吃虧) literally as “eat (a) loss,” which I thought was close enough to similar English expressions about financial loss that I translated as is. It’s worthy to note that eating a loss has potential for wordplay in the pun-happy environment of the Chinese language.

3] Xiaobao is obliquely referring to [Taiwan](#), which is an island off the coast of China whose modern history started as the location of the fleeing members of the deposed Republic of China (ROC) after the Communists took over the mainland as the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Taiwan has historically been late to the party in terms of being assimilated into the current Chinese government. Quick summary: Taiwan was initially inhabited by aborigines that had contact with the Dutch and Spanish before the pro-Ming Chinese began to colonize it in order to resist the Manchu rule of the Qing dynasty before it was finally annexed by the Manchu

Qing. It was then ceded to Japan in the wake of the [Sino-Japanese War](#) before being regained by the ROC that then used it as its new seat of power in resistance of the Communists. Ever since then, the question of Taiwan's legitimacy, independence, and sovereignty have been up in the air, especially since China has gained international acknowledgment and grown into a world power, gaining the upper hand in terms of diplomatic recognition of sovereignty. Political tension between their two governments will periodically flare up whenever the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty or independence comes up due to debate over the [One China Policy](#), which is not helped by the fact that there is only a narrow stretch of sea called the [Taiwan Strait](#) separating them. Naturally, diplomacy between China and Taiwan can be referred to as "[cross-strait relations](#)" or in Chinese, "haixia liang an guanxi" (海峽兩岸關係), which literally translates to "relationship of the two sides of the sea channel."

4] The reason why Xiaobao mentions that he only recognizes some characters is because of the Chinese government's revision of the Chinese characters into a [Simplified character set](#) in order to, so they claim, try to increase the literacy rate of its populace. Since territories like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia were not affected and continued using the unmodified [Traditional Chinese character set](#), this led to a forking of the written Chinese language. There has been a lot of [debate](#) over this move ever since. It is worthy to note that even how Traditional characters are referred to in Chinese is heavily politicized as mainland China (PRC) refers to them as "fan ti" (繁體) or "complex form" while Taiwan (ROC) calls them "zheng ti" (正體) or "proper form" characters. Since this change was done during the 20th century, Xiaobao was educated in Simplified Chinese and would not be as familiar with the Traditional characters that Tang China used and would only know the characters that were not modified. By the way, the Chinese characters used in these footnotes are from the

Traditional character set, which are easier to convert to the Simplified version than vice versa due to how the character substitution can work for the Simplified characters with one Simplified character replacing multiple Traditional characters that could have wildly different meanings from one another but the reverse process of which can't be perfectly automated by computer due to the lack of predictable contextual cues (ex: hair, which is tou fa/頭髮 in Traditional would be written as 頭髮 in Simplified but 頭髮 could also be alternatively construed to mean “initial send” depending on the context since head/頭 can be interpreted as first while fa/發 is an existing character that is used to mean to send, transmit, or release).

5] Wang Juan is using “ma” (媽) as an exclamation here, likely as a shorthand that references the curse, “your mom,” similarly to how someone can just exclaim, “Fuck!” or “Damn!” Because of how she is saying it here, I am translating it as onomatopoeia.

6] I'm assuming that Wang Juan is referring to information that a specialist could give such as in sports medicine where they could monitor the athlete's condition and provide advice based on the data from the medical readouts.

7] Xiaobao says “ren qian xian gui, jiu yao ren hou shou zhui” (人前顯貴, 就要人後受罪), which paraphrases a quote that was popularized by the Chinese novel, [Farewell, My Concubine](#) (Bawang Bie Ji/霸王別姬) by [Lilian Lee](#) (Li Bihua/李碧華). The meaning is that suffering and great effort must be gone through behind the scenes in order to show off the results on stage in a glorious display.

[8\]](#) “Yao guai” (妖怪) is used here, which can refer to the devils and demon spirits of Chinese folklore and myth. But it can also simply mean monster as in freak. The connotation in Chinese is similar to how it is in English where it could be hyperbole in an insulting or praising way depending on interpretation like how “beast” is used in English (i.e. he’s a beast at basketball versus he’s a beast of a man).

[9\]](#) “Shen xian” (神仙) is a legendary figure rather unique to Eastern lore born out of the idea that one can ascend to a higher level of being and become superhuman or immortal through enlightenment, etc. Daoism is closely related to how the [xian](#) (or sage as I have translated it though others have translated it as celestial, fairy, or immortal) would manifest though there are different avenues other than Daoism through which they can pursue enlightenment, immortality, ascension, etc. The “xian xia” (仙俠) and “xiu zhen” (修真) genres of Chinese fiction are different takes on this type of figure. The closest Western equivalent is likely the wizards of fantasy or the various [demigod](#) heroes of various European myths. The reason why it’s significant that Mrs. Zhang-Wang insists Xiaobao and Juan-Juan are divine sages instead of monsters is because Chinese folklore believed entering the reincarnation cycles was one of the ways such sages tried to gain enlightenment in order to power up. Some powerful sages could be reborn still bearing memories from their previous life, making them act wise beyond their years, which could easily be mistaken for possession by a monster such as a devil, demon, ghost, or spirit that was just as long-lived or knowledgeable in the arcane.

[10\]](#) Father Zhang is how I translate “Zhang Fu” (張父), which is just the author’s shorthand for Zhang Xiaobao’s father.

[11\]](#) The master that is being used here, “[shifu](#)” (師傅), is a form of address that can refer to Buddhist monks or [Daoist priests](#) who would be the Chinese go-to figures for exorcisms just like how Catholic priest are stereotypically called upon in horror movies with demonic possession. The speaker who uses this term would be conveying respect for the person’s expertise or mastery so it can also be applied to someone who is a master in their field like an artisan. This term also comes up in martial arts as well as wuxia and xianxia fiction but is written as 師父 for the additional connotation of “father” to emphasize the type of parental role they play in the master-disciple relationships of these situations. Obviously, this form of the term would be one only disciples or apprentices would use.

[12\]](#) It’s difficult to translate “qie shen” (妾身) well as it’s one of those ancient Chinese [illeisms](#) that a wife or concubine could use when using humble speech with her lord and husband. Even though it literally means “concubine body,” that is meant to be a metaphor for her servility when a wife says it in order to show her verbal submission even though she isn’t technically a concubine. To make it even more confusing, a concubine could use this illeism as well though they could also use nujia/奴家 or “slave family” to show even more respect in their humble speech. To try to replicate the same effect but not add too much to reader confusion that could be caused by seeing Mrs. Zhang-Wang seem to incorrectly refer to herself as a concubine, I’ve translated it as “this consort.”

[13\]](#) I’ve translated “gong ming” (功名) as “honorary title” to try to encapsulate what it meant in ancient China. This is the general term colloquially used for the various degrees conferred upon those that passed the different tiers of the civil exams. The titles granted privileges but not necessarily positions in the Imperial government as it was up to the individual holders what they did

with the diplomas received. Some whose personalities were unsuited for the political arena simply took the tests to be qualified as teachers or for the tax break and increase in social status while others who sought a governmental position might not have the connections or money to get a good placing if their results weren't high enough or whatever so used these scholarly titles as a foundation for their clan and to get a foothold into a higher social circle. However, the correlating relationship between an official and the title gained from passing the [civil exams](#) was high so for the large majority of people, it was the only route to success and prestige.

[14\]](#) The “room” he is referring to here is an oblique reference to terms that were synonymous for wives and concubines. Ancient Chinese [polygamy](#) or [polygyny](#) allowed only 1 wife but had the option of multiple concubines. Depending on the era and family, the requirements for taking on a concubine could be stringent or very lax. Usually, the wife's permission had to be asked for and granted though, even if nominally. However, as a sign of her supreme status, the wife was usually placed in the main residential wing or rooms of the house while the concubines were generally in the side wings, which were symbolically less prestigious. So wives were also called “main houses” or “main rooms” while concubines were called “side houses” or “side rooms,” which is similar to how the other man or woman that a partner was cheating with could be colloquially referred to as a “side piece” in English. Also of note is that the main and side room arrangement is an important consideration for hosts and guests as well as masters and servants so placing servants in the main room of a house would be a severe break in protocol and show that the household was messy and uncultured for not holding to etiquette while a host giving up their place in the main rooms to a very highly honored guest could be a way to show respect.

[15\]](#) “~You” (呦)—pronounced more like “yo” like in “yo-yo” rather than “you” as in the second person pronoun—is another one of those exclamatory sentence particles that can add emphasis to certain portions of speech. It can give the speech a drawling effect as well.

[16\]](#) Technically, the verb used here is “xiu” (休), which means “to rest.” The divorce Mrs. Zhang-Wang is speaking of here is not the modern concept of divorce, which Chinese translates as “li hun” (離婚) or literally, “leave marriage.” [Divorce in ancient China](#) was one-sided and tilted heavily in the man’s favor as it was legally valid only if the husband wrote a divorce letter stating that the wife had been repudiated or cast off. The only constraint on the husband in terms of the divorce requirements was that the reason for the divorce had to fall under one of the 7 wrongs (qi chu/七出), which were if the wife was unfilial, had no son (although this usually required barrenness for 3 years), was vulgar/lewd/adulterous, was jealous, was diseased, gossiped too much, or stole. Only 3 exceptions called “san bu qu” (三不去) or “3 no go” existed that prevented a wife from being unilaterally divorced and that was if she had no place to return to, had mourned a parent-in-law for the full 3 years, or had wed the husband in poverty but he was now wealthy. Also, note that concubines didn’t even need a divorce to be legally cast off. If the concubine had a rank (i.e. they were gifted by elders or belonged to families that were of similar rank or higher to the man’s household or were officially registered), they might receive a letter stating that they had no more ties with the man’s family but it was not necessarily a requirement and not treated with the same formality as when a wife was divorced. Concubines in general could be sold or given away like property. This was because of the thinking that they were really “ban ge zhuren” (半個主人) or “half a master” as

they were not considered to be fully legitimate masters since the wife could order around the concubines like common servants due to the household hierarchy though they were still waited upon by servants with some heavily favored concubines getting treated like or better than wives if the man was foolish or heretical enough to do so. It also did not help matters that the men of a household could technically elevate an existing maid servant into a bed warming maid as a precursor to making them a full concubine. The concubines straddled a gray area in terms of legal protection, which was a quality that was passed on to their offspring who only gained some marginal protection for being of the household bloodline. Divorce (and marriage) law that was more in line with modern sensibilities was only established in China in the 20th century.

[17\]](#) He uses “fu ren” (夫人) here, which is the same term that I had previously translated as “Mistress” that the servants use to address her. But since he is using it for the other meaning of the word, “wife,” I have chosen to translate it as “Missus” as it is an English word whose etymological origins are related to the word “Mistress.” His speech is akin to a husband addressing his wife as “Madam” even in private such as in 19th century British literature like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Oliver Twist*, or *Jane Eyre*, etc.

[18\]](#) “Gao zhuang” (告狀) literally means to “speak form.” This makes more sense once you realize that an official letter of complaint or petition that was presented to a court magistrate to open up a case or lawsuit is called a “zhuang zhi” (狀紙) or “form paper.” When used in more casual settings, this expression could be translated as to snitch, tell on, complain, etc.

[19\]](#) “Zhang” (丈) is a traditional [Chinese unit of measure for](#)

[length](#) that was set as 10 [chi](#) (尺), measuring out to be around ~3.5 meters and 3.6 yards. It was later standardized to be 3.5 yards. I will be noting [yard] next to it as a reminder to readers as to the role it plays in relation to the other Chinese measurement units for length but it is not actually equal to a yard.

Chapter 11: Daytime Fatigue Requires Massaging

When Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan used four limbs to finish crawling 40 meters on the sand floor, they were all lying there exhausted, not moving one bit. Shiliu had been standing to the side accompanying them. She had really been horrified now. What children were these? When crawling the last 2 zhang [yards] left of the way, she clearly saw how the two children's short little arms and legs didn't stop trembling.

She'd had a similar experience so she understood well what that feeling was like. In fact, she'd previously had only trembling in her arms but her legs had been fine. She had just started out at the manor and being unfamiliar with how to do things, she had been punished. At that time, she had been endlessly cursing in her heart yet she didn't dare not work—if she didn't, then her family's living would be broken off.

If someone had let her rest back then, she would have been grateful to that person for a lifetime. But right now, just what were Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan doing this for? Could it be just for play? Whose children would 'play' so desperately when they were this big? If there were really people who had children play like this, then the children would already have cried looking for Mom.

As she thought of this, a little esteem rose up from within Shiliu's heart. She told herself that perhaps rich people's children were all this formidable. As she looked at the sand all over the children's

bodies and those little faces and hands that were tanned completely red, Shiliu had people prepare the bathwater on the one hand while on the other, she walked near, wanting to pick up the two children.

“No need. The two of us after resting a while can walk by ourselves. Have people make the bathwater a bit hotter. Warm the vintage wine as well. Warming a large kettle will do. Go, there’s no need to keep minding us.” Zhang Xiaobao used all of his energy to shake his head while instructing Shiliu.

Shiliu hesitated for a bit before acting according to what Little Mister had said. She didn’t leave though and stood there to the side as things had been arranged for.

“Really fucking [modern]¹ comfortable. Aiya,² how long has it been to be this tired? So nostalgic of the original days.” Zhang Xiaobao basked in the sun as he faced downward and stuck his head into the cove it made in the wet sand as he spoke in a muffled voice.

“Isn’t that so? Today is still of no matter but tomorrow’s practice, we’ll really suffer, ~ne. In a while, just having milk, even if our bellies are stuffed to the max, we’ll still be hungry at night. Xiaobao, what to eat tonight?” Wang Juan also mimicked Zhang Xiaobao in using her head to burrow into the sand.

“Who knows, ~ne? Right now, I don’t want to consider this issue. Just want to lie down and sleep.” Zhang Xiaobao also vigorously stuck his small hands into the sand. It was cool there.

Wang Juan imitated his actions: “That won’t do. You need to decide. That little bit of milk will affect our training tomorrow.”

“If you can endure the greasiness, then let’s drink mutton soup. Have them cook the mutton till it’s mushy. Lessen the salt and other seasonings added—want to eat something light. It’ll be cucumber and chicken egg soup then. Only a bit of cucumber and mix the chicken eggs loosely before adding some chopped scallions. It’s better than a hungry stomach.” Zhang Xiaobao wanted to eat something light right now.

“Mutton soup, then. I’ll bear with the queasiness. After all, this stuff can quickly replenish energy. Gruel³ is too watery and too slow to heat. Our rice here isn’t that great.” Wang Juan chose the item she most didn’t want to eat.

Zhang Xiaobao exerted himself before he could finally stand up. Pulling Wang Juan up, the two of them walked towards the shade together, that tottering pace causing Shiliu to the side anxiety as she watched.

After soaking in a hot water bath for less than an hour,⁴ Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan used the warmed vintage wine to massage each other. Whoever’s turn it was to be massaged, they would bite down on clothing at the side and endure that feeling of aching soreness. Everyone had been driven out. The two of them didn’t wish to let others see their display of discomfort.

“Xiaobao, this alcohol percentage is too low. Let’s distill it a bit.

The body absorption is slow; it's all vaporized." Wang Juan whined as she spoke.

"I don't like this stuff—it has no use. If you want to make drunken shrimp,⁵ Shaoxing yellow wine⁶ is the best."

"It can be used to disinfect when treating external injuries." Wang Juan kept urging. She didn't know the steps for distillation but she believed that Zhang Xiaobao would have no problems.

"No, I dislike ethanol. It easily causes pus under the scabbing. When I was injured in the past, I'd directly use yellow iodine solution."⁷

"You can get injured as well, even as such a formidable person?" Wang Juan here was just looking for a topic to talk about; she had been rubbed by Zhang Xiaobao till she had nearly cried out loud.

"How could I not get injured? When practicing, I'd constantly be injured. But it was okay, there was the money stolen from the officials to sustain me. Once, I jumped down from a height of 13 meters. Both of my legs were broken. Slapped down 200K at the hospital and they waited on me like I was an ancestor. When my legs were good, I continued jumping until I found that kind of feeling." Zhang Xiaobao finished massaging Wang Juan's last leg and directly lay leaning down.

Wang Juan gritted her teeth as she climbed back up and began giving Zhang Xiaobao a massage: "A great beauty like me giving you a massage, you happy? You comfortable?"

“What feeling? Right now, anyone that touches me, I am all one single feeling. How is yellow iodine solution produced? I tricked people in the past before without involving this stuff. If I’d known it would be like this, I’d have learned about it. It’s only a matter of a few sentences. Just a mention to remember and I could memorize it.” Zhang Xiaobao bared his teeth, sharply inhaling on the one hand and grunting as he spoke on the other.

“The matter you let Erniu’s family do and there’s also the one with Yingtao, have you decided on what to do in the end? If there’s a leak, ~ne?” Both of Wang Juan’s hands pushed down on Zhang Xiaobao’s back, nearly all of her body weight pressing on top.

Zhang Xiaobao had wanted to speak then but he suddenly grunted. It wasn’t until Wang Juan shifted position that he exhaled as he said: “No fear. The ideas to make a bit of pocket change are plentiful. Wait till others have learned how to, then we’ll do other things. This kind of thing is the same as tricking people—flexibility and adaptability is necessary. Clinging onto one kind of thing in this time period, maintaining confidentiality isn’t easily done, ~ah.”

“Fine, you’re almighty. That hot pot, ~ne? You’re not prepared to use it to make money?”

“Only idiots will use hot pot to sell for money. That plaything—just a glance, and others will know how. Keeping it secret isn’t even possible. Once my and your family members have all eaten well, we’ll publicize it in a free promotion. Let all who wish to dine this way know the method of making this hot pot. Then, we’ll sell

the ingredients. Actually, the most typical one is to add starch—that way the meat won't toughen up so easily. I don't know how to make it so let him cook rice or wheat. The starch content in that stuff is high. At that time, we'll have another income stream." Zhang Xiaobao's eyes slowly closed. This type of feeling when being massaged was really too comfortable—soreness that was just right, aching till it was relieving.

As the two of them massaged each other inside the small room, outside, Mrs. Zhang-Wang was eating with great effort as well. When Shiliu arranged for people to make a thick mutton soup, Mrs. Zhang-Wang had people make pork elbows for her to eat at the same time—the type that was unsalted and taking two bites would lead to a moment of nausea. The little maid servant that specifically attended on her, Xiaoqiu,⁸ looked at that basin full of oily and greasy pork elbows and without needing to eat it, just a look made her want to puke. While she watched Mistress vigorously eat over there, she urged: "Mistress, this stuff really is too greasy. How about adding a bit of salt? To get it down like this won't do, ~ah."

"Add what salt? Adding salt can still induce milk?⁹ My son and my daughter-in-law are badly tired today. If I don't eat more, how can I feed them well? Other people's children will energetically cry with just a bit. How understanding are my family's two children? If by chance, they get hungry, they won't cry like other children. They'd just bear with it. The more they're like this, the more that the mother I am will feel sorry. Tonight when you sleep next door, listen carefully. If there's any movement, just call for me to get up for a breastfeeding."

Mrs. Zhang-Wang spoke a few words before beginning to eat

again. Thinking of the children's sweet smiles when they fell asleep after a feeding, she felt that these pork elbows weren't that greasy after all.

“Mistress, how about finding two wet-nurses?¹⁰ You [honorific], a single person feeding two children, it's too tiring.” Xiaoqiu advised next to her.

“Don't look. My family's children I can feed myself. I still have elbows here to eat, ~ne. How many people who had children and wanted to eat a bit of meat but couldn't, didn't they bear with it, too?” As Mrs. Zhang-Wang spoke, she scooped up a piece of fatty meat that was 1 cun [inch]¹¹ thick. Opening her mouth to shove it inside, her face broke out into a smile as if she had just fought a victorious battle.

When night came, it was just as Mrs. Zhang-Wang had thought; Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan woke up after sleeping for 2 hours. When muscles were recombining, the heat consumption was really great. The prepared mutton soup was all eaten by Mrs. Zhang-Wang while the two of them still had milk.

On the second day, when Mrs. Zhang-Wang left to do other things, Zhang Xiaobao summoned Shiliu to ask: “Yesterday before dinner, what did my Mom eat?”

“In reply to Little Mister, it was elbows.” Shiliu replied.

“That's fine. You may go.”

“Xiaobao, elbows can induce milk but isn’t the effect not that fast?” Wang Juan waited till Shiliu reached the exterior room before asking.

“The milk we had yesterday had nothing to do with the elbows. This is a type of self-hypnotic subconscious suggestion. My Mom believed that eating elbows could induce even more milk so she concentrated on having more milk herself. The result was that she really had some milk. It’s just like sleepwalkers that climb up high-rises. Under those types of conditions, he believed he could climb up and as long as his bodily functions could theoretically fulfill this demand, he could climb up there.” Zhang Xiaobao explained.

“Oh, then we still walking in the sand today?” Wang Juan nodded to show she understood, not saying too much. They were all adults; there was no need to mention words of gratitude.

“Walking in the sand is fine. You should have discovered that we actually aren’t a bit uncomfortable. This is the advantage of a child’s body; the recuperation speed is extremely fast. Today, let’s walk around outside. We’ll walk separately. I want to get familiar with the affairs of the manor. You have Shiliu lead you. I’ll get Yingtao.” Zhang Xiaobao made the decision.

After finishing their milk, they were carried out by people. What Zhang Xiaobao wanted to see was what was actually being planted inside the manor and whether the yield could be increased while Wang Juan was assigned with the mission of understanding the hearts and minds of the peasants so they operated separately.

Yingtao went and bought chicken eggs yesterday. Today, she didn't need to go herself and there were people who had already brought the chicken eggs over here. It was all according to her request of newly laid eggs with at least one end rounded as well as not being excessively rocked. Zhang Xiaobao was a little worried about this last bit.

As if aware of Little Mister's concern, Yingtao directly said to Zhang Xiaobao: "Rest assured, Little Mister. Not a single one of these people dare to trick us. I will mark the eggs they bring over. Whichever family's eggs spoil and die the most, I'll go seek them out then."

"That is good. I'm not worried. When the chicks come out, what stuff has been prepared to feed them?" Zhang Xiaobao considered it. The people here were not the same as his own time period, they were not that bad.

"Feed what? Taking them out to feed will be fine. They can find stuff to eat themselves. They can even eat grains of sand." Yingtao replied casually.

"That won't do. My family's chickens definitely must be sturdier than other people's chickens."

Notes:

[1\]](#) The Chinese version of "fuck" is actually an abbreviation of what would translate to "motherfucking," which they usually just shorten to "your mom" or any other variation as a curse. I note that this is the modern version because in ancient China, saying

“fuck” or “your mom” would actually be “ni niang” (你娘) since using ma/媽 to address one’s mother was not common then. Wang Juan is actually saying “his mom” or “ta ma” (他媽), which is slightly softened in tone as a generic curse since it’s not aimed at anyone in particular.

[2\]](#) “Aiya” (哎呀) is another common Chinese sound of exhalation that is a variation on “aiyou” (哎呦).

[3\]](#) I’ve translated “xi zhou” (稀粥) as gruel though it literally translates to “thin porridge/congee.” [Congee](#) is the name used in English for the Chinese version of porridge, which is made out of rice.

[4\]](#) The text says less than half of a “[shichen](#)” (時辰), which is the unit of time the Chinese divided their days into and equates to 2 hours. I converted into modern-day time rather than go for a literal translation.

[5\]](#) [Drunken shrimp](#) (zui xia/醉蝦) is a Chinese dish where freshwater shrimp are soaked in alcohol and usually eaten alive though the recipes can vary depending on the region.

[6\]](#) [Shaoxing wine](#) (紹興酒) is a famous example of a traditional Chinese wine ([huang jiu](#)/黃酒 or yellow wine), which is fermented from rice. It can be directly imbibed as a beverage or used as a cooking wine in Chinese cuisine.

[7\]](#) The Chinese term Xiaobao uses, “huang dian shui” (黃碘水), literally translates to “yellow iodine water” and is referring to the

organic compound solutions of iodine that are used as [disinfectants](#) (iodine being poisonous to humans in larger quantities). They stain the skin yellow, hence their name in Chinese. The forms of iodine-based disinfectants depend on what agent they're solubilized in such as [tincture of iodine](#), [Lugol's iodine](#), and [Povidone iodine](#) (an [iodophor](#)).

[8\]](#) “Xiaoqiu” (小秋) means “little autumn.”

[9\]](#) The philosophy of Chinese medicine greatly believes that nutrition is part of health and thus food can influence or cause many physical effects. In this case, the belief that certain foods encouraged lactation. Scientifically, the substances that promote lactation are called [galactagogues](#). Conversely, the Chinese also believed that substances such as salty foods could interfere with and impede lactation, thus Mrs. Zhang-Wang's refusal of Xiaoqiu's suggestion here.

[10\]](#) In Chinese, “nai niang” (奶娘) literally means “breast mother.” They are frequently a character archetype that will appear in stories set in ancient China and stereotypically have a great deal of influence on the child that they breastfed since the household will generally employ them as a nanny and caretaker of the child once the child is weaned. Common translations of this term are “nurse” or “nanny” as well. [Wet nursing](#) was a historical practice that employed a lactating mother to breastfeed a baby in cases where the biological mother was unable or unwilling to breastfeed. With the invention of baby formula, this practice is no longer as prevalent. However, wet nurses still show up in developing countries as well as in areas like China, Indonesia, and the Philippines where their hiring is a display of social status and wealth on the part of the employers.

11] “[Cun](#)” (寸) is the Chinese unit of measure for length that was traditionally based off the span of the thumb at the knuckle. It was also set to be a tenth of a [chi](#) (尺). It was standardized a couple of times throughout history but a cun measured in between ~3-4 centimeters and over ~1 inch in length. As a reminder to readers of the role it plays in the Chinese measurement system for length as inch does in the [imperial system](#), I will be notating [inch] next to it. Obviously, it is not equivalent though and the variable values of this unit over time makes a conversion difficult for me.

Chapter 12: Philanthropist That Swindlers Do Not Mind

When Zhang Xiaobao said those words, many thoughts formed within his mind in that moment. Seeing Yingtao's puzzled look, he said: "If it's solely free-range, the growth will be slow. I must accumulate within a short time a large amount of money to do stuff. How about this, you listen to me talk. You return to find several servants. Have them gather up the rotten rice straws or wheat stalks.

Especially the firewood piles that other people of the manor use for fuel. The weather's just right. It even rained before. Those firewood piles underneath must all be sodden. They'll have to flip and dry them. So you'll use money to get them. Give some spare money;¹ that stuff isn't worth much money. You judge how much to give. Collect it all and transport it to the worst of the lands lying fallow behind my house. Use dirt to bury it.

Then, go and find people to catch earthworms—unh, they're called night crawlers.² Throw them in there to raise. Also, put some dung droppings in there, too. Once it's almost night time—you yourself can do it or finding others to do it is fine—pick up the foul fish and shrimp that's been discarded by people at the market fair. If there are river snails or whatever, that's even better. Take it all back here and find an empty spot to air dry."

"Little Mister, what do you [honorific] want to do? Those fish or whatever are already inedible." Yingtao was muddled. She felt that this Little Mister's thinking really couldn't be regarded with an ordinary perspective.

“How dumb, ~ne. Before, didn’t I speak of raising chickens? Of course, it’s to have these things ground into powder to feed the chickens. That way, our family’s chickens will grow the fastest, lay the most eggs, and won’t even have soft-shelled eggs appear.” Zhang Xiaobao discovered that the most painful thing in life was when you are speaking but others had no way of understanding. If this was his own subordinates from before, he would definitely die from anger. Why couldn’t they crack it³ themselves, ~ne?

“Oh, I understand. Little Mister, you [honorific] are really almighty. Though I don’t know if this will be fine or not but whatever you [honorific] say, I just feel like it is right. At that time, we’ll sell the chicken eggs. If the chickens don’t lay eggs, we can still sell the chickens. Stuff that’s picked up doesn’t cost money—it’s a no-cost business, ~ah.” Yingtao felt like she had thought it through herself.

Zhang Xiaobao raised his hand to smack his forehead with the discovery that if he really had Yingtao lead on her own,⁴ she was still too far off. Fortunately, he didn’t directly gripe at Yingtao. He felt that it was he himself who hadn’t brought up his subordinates well and could only patiently groom them slowly so he said to Yingtao: “My family won’t sell chicken eggs. Those chicken eggs, I am keeping to make cakes, ~ne. Otherwise, if you go buy chicken eggs, you already lose a sum of money during the process of the purchase. If we keep this portion of the profit for ourselves, wouldn’t that be better? That item that I had Erniu’s family produce can make cakes—talking about it with you, you wouldn’t understand. Learn it bit by bit.”

“Yes, Little Mister is surely a devil spirit.⁵ No, the reincarnation of a divine sage—that’s what everyone is saying.” Yingtao said a bootlicking sentence.⁶

That caused Zhang Xiaobao to start worrying at once. So he himself and Wang Juan had already caught the notice of others and rumors of devil spirits reincarnating had already spread out—who was it? Was it on purpose or without intent? This one day, ~ah! Doing a bit of stuff even required a cover up, needing to waste quite a bit of attention. How much money could be earned with this energy? This matter must be investigated thoroughly and moreover, a means to seal the leak thought of.

The reasoning behind the prominent rafters rotting first⁷ anyone should know. What to do, ~ne? Might as well seek out Mother to discuss this. Anyone could harm him but his own mother wouldn’t harm him. Of course, the Wu Meiniang⁸ that had already died being an exception—that was a genuine devil spirit, ~ne.⁹

“Little Mister, just this? Is there anything else? ” Yingtao, seeing that Little Mister was silent at this moment, was a bit afraid. Little Mister’s face was powerfully overcast. An adult made this expression to let others know that he was angry; a child making this expression was a bit too piercing, especially those eyes of the child—just meeting their gaze would basically cause insecurity. They really were too pure, too devoid.

“There is. There’s still something. I want to ask now. From whose mouth did you hear about us being monsters or devil spirits?” At this time, Zhang Xiaobao didn’t have any smile at all.

Usually, he would use a baby's expression and a child's smile when speaking to others.

"Little Mister, what is it? It, it was Xiaoqi—the Xiaoqi¹⁰ who chops firewood behind the kitchen. He said, he said when he was carrying firewood, he heard the words that Master spoke in the backyard¹¹ saying that Little Mister was a monster." Yingtao was scared.

"Xiaoqi? How long has been working in my house, what did he do before?" Zhang Xiaobao didn't think that the source of this matter was actually due to his own father. He naturally couldn't upbraid Father. Father must have been speaking to Mother at the time. That Xiaoqi, how could his ears be so sharp? His mouth that loose?

He and Wang Juan were already doing their best to be careful lest other people would know too many things by having Erniu seal his mouth tight like a jar,¹² letting Yingtao keep it secret, and handing over business for others to do. Mother was intelligent so she found out. That was nothing. Anybody else finding out—that would be troublesome. A tree apart from the forest, the wind surely would destroy it; a shoal higher than the shore, the waves surely would disturb it.¹³ He himself being a swindler, the most important thing was concealment. A swindler being captured, was there a need to describe what consequences there would be? He didn't even consider that the problem would come from the inside.

When thinking on this, Zhang Xiaobao could only sigh. After all, this house hadn't been built by his own hands. The personnel quality varied too greatly. Before him, the only matter to be

accomplished was to figure out this person, Xiaoqi. If it was a campaign of deliberate intent, then there was only a single result—death. Without intent, then he'd need to think of a way to organize the manor. This was aggravating, ~ah. Using these people, even if it wasn't like directing your own arms, but they still shouldn't constantly create trouble for him.

“Little Mister, the matter you [honorific] just spoke of—what did you want me to do?” Yingtao followed up with a question.

“Oh, speaking of the main business. That, I'll ask you. Our manor and the Wang Manor's people, after eating the chicken eggs, where do the eggshells go? After eating the chicken, where do the chicken feathers go?” Zhang Xiaobao wasn't one of those people who had never seen great turbulence before after all. He wouldn't let a single matter affect the entire plan.

“Thrown out, of course. My family's courtyard house is also like this. Always have to throw out a bit every day.” The ‘my family's courtyard house’ that Yingtao spoke of was Zhang Xiaobao's family's.

“Thrown out? It's really thrown out? That's to say, those wine-houses and restaurants also throw them all out? Good, that's great. Yingtao, giving you a new mission. You find other people—you're too busy to. Go collect those things that have been thrown out for me.” Zhang Xiaobao was that happy. These were all good playthings for creating fodder. If he didn't understand how to create down-filled clothing and was afraid that the current clothing materials would shed the down, he could have even made down-filled clothing.

“How come it’s all rotten stuff that doesn’t need money?” Yingtao said in a low voice. Raising her head to see Little Mister was currently looking at her, she then hastily said: “All right, Little Mister, wait till I return and I’ll arrange for people to collect those things that you [honorific] spoke of. Little Mister, it’s too hot here. Let’s go under the tree shade to sit.”

“Unh, that’s fine. This plot is also my family’s? Why is it all planted with trees?” Zhang Xiaobao was led by Yingtao to the bottom of a big tree. Sitting on top of a piece of rock that Yingtao had used a cushion to pad it with, he asked this while pointing a finger at a plot of woods in the distance.

“In reply to Little Mister’s words, that plot is an eternal industry field¹⁴ that those above had us plant trees on.”

“Oh, could it be that they have this kind of awareness now? That’s not right. I remember that this time period is deforestation to create farmlands, ~ah.” Zhang Xiaobao was a bit unclear.

Yingtao also didn’t understand exactly what Little Mister was saying. Assuming that Little Mister was asking about those woods, she said: “Planted in these places are mulberry¹⁵ trees—have to hand over quite a bit of silk every year.”

With this one mention, Zhang Xiaobao understood. So it wasn’t a simple grove. It required an output and it wasn’t even the product from processing wood. Then that said, he could exercise his brains when it came to the woods inside.

Zhang Xiaobao started executing the next step of the plan. The insides of his skull had nearly all turned into paste—especially that Xiaoqi, too detestable.

Wang Juan's mission was to observe the native environment and population. Carried by Shiliu while walking around the place, they walked and walked until they reached the vicinity of the little bridge outside of the manor. Crossing this bridge was considered leaving the sphere of influence of the Wang Manor and Zhang Manor. Shiliu didn't dare move and carrying Wang Juan, she sat down on the stool by the bridge on this side. Pointing at that stream trickling by, she said to Wang Juan: "Juan-Juan, see this water? It's so refreshing. Wait till you're a bit bigger and you can go down to play."

Wang Juan could care less if the water was refreshing or not. She wanted to hear other people making small talk but the problem was that there were no other people in the surrounding area. If she chatted with Shiliu, then she might as well just go home, ~ne. Looking around in all directions, she discovered that there were several black dots where the river downstream was gentler in the distance. Raising a hand to point over there, she asked: "What is that?"

"Those are rude boys¹⁶ swimming." Shiliu had naturally seen them. Not just the children from the two manors were playing over there; even the children belonging to some of the families that lived by the bridge were there, too. Their butts were bare as they fought water battles. She felt that she shouldn't let the Wangs' Little Miss see that.

“I want to see.” Wang Juan strained towards that direction, trying to break free from Shiliu’s embrace. Shiliu patiently offered advice but the end result didn’t need to be declared. Wang Juan was victorious. Shiliu carried Wang Juan while walking toward there.

Wang Juan prepared to look at the physical conditions of the children—do they get enough nutrition? Also, looking at the clothing placed on the banks—were the households rich? Just as they were visibly about to reach the spot, at this time, a child suddenly ran over from that side of the bridge to yell out at his other companions still in the water: “Quickly go look, ~ah! Great Philanthropist Song¹⁷ is coming.”

Upon hearing this, the children came out of the water with a “hua-la” sound. Deftly donning their clothes and regardless of which manor they were from, they all ran over towards that side.

“What philanthropist?” Wang Juan asked.

“Ai, more people got taken in. What philanthropist? It’s just a swindler. This Swindler Song is formidable, tricking so many people and yet, there are so many people who call him a philanthropist. Let’s go back. Otherwise, if he sees Juan-Juan, he’ll even trick you along with the rest. He can’t be messed with but we can still hide away.” Shiliu sighed once, a swindler with each breath, holding Wang Juan intending to leave.

If it was something else, Wang Juan really would leave. But upon

hearing philanthropist and then swindler, she suddenly smiled as she said to Shiliu: “Where is there a swindler? He’s definitely a philanthropist.”

“Little Miss, he really is a swindler. You really mustn’t go over there. Upon meeting this person, I hear that there’s no one who wasn’t tricked.” Shiliu was frightened.

“Wrong, he is definitely not a swindler. With such a good place, how could there be swindlers? Go. Flag down a child that hasn’t run far. Have him return to the manor there with a greeting. Have Xiaobao carried over here. When Xiaobao gets here, you ask Xiaobao where there is a swindler—there are only good people.” Wang Juan said with certainty.

Notes:

[1\]](#) The original Chinese used was “xian qian” (顯錢), which is a bit nonsensical since it translates to “display money.” The author likely made a typo since a homophone, “xian qian” (閒錢), means “spare money” which would make much more sense in context with the rest of the dialogue.

[2\]](#) Xiaobao first uses “qiu yin” (蚯蚓) before using the casual/ancient term, “di long” (地龍), which means “earth dragon.” To produce a similar effect, I used “night crawler,” which is an alternate name in English that’s slang for earthworm.

[3\]](#) The author literally uses “break shell” (kai ke/開殼) as a description. It isn’t a standard expression or idiom though it is similar to the phrase commonly used to describe receiving an

epiphany or gaining enlightenment, “kai qiao” (開竅). I chose to interpret the author’s choice of words similarly and translate it as an euphemism for enlightenment or understanding.

4] The Chinese used here is “du dang yi mian” (獨擋一面), which translates to “solitarily block a side/face.” It’s generally used to describe someone who can make judgment calls or decisions independent of any guidance or specific orders and/or lead one side of the battlefield.

5] I’ve translated “yao jing” (妖精) as “devil spirit” because “demon” matches up more with “mo” (魔) in my mental lexicon. “Yao” (妖) tended to be indiscriminately applied as a label to anything that was heretical to the mundane so it could encompass evil spirits but it could also include amoral or benign spirits. In those cases, the label was usually applied to beings of non-human or fantastical origins that later gained sentience or a humanoid appearance.

6] I’ve used bootlicking as the translation for the idiom of “pai ma pi” (拍馬屁), which literally translates to “pat/clap horse ass” since bootlicking has a metaphorical image that is also synonymous with the same meaning of fawning or being a toady to someone.

7] I translated this expression, “chu tou de chuan zi xian lan” (出頭的椽子先爛), literally since its meaning is explained by its usage in text. It describes how the first person to step forward gets taken down more easily like the rafters in a house that stand out more are exposed to the elements and thus, tend to rot more easily. It is an adage adapted from the Ming dynasty era Chinese novel, “[Jin](#)

[Ping Mei](#)” (金瓶梅), which is written by an anonymous author who used the pseudonym of “Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng” (蘭陵笑笑生). The title of this novel is normally translated as “The Plum in the Golden Vase” or “The Golden Lotus.” It was a spin-off of the classic novel, [Water Margin](#) or “Shui Hu Zhuan” (水滸傳), by [Shi Nai'an](#) (施耐庵), which itself is considered one of the [Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature](#). In contrast to the classical source it is based off of, Jin Ping Mei is infamous for its lewd material (hence the multiple porn adaptations that it has spawned) but similarly, it has also added greatly to the Chinese vernacular including idioms such as the one Xiaobao uses here. However, people using the phrases or idioms this book spawned are likely not aware of the source just like most people probably don't realize that Shakespeare invented the word “elbow” or that the word “sadistic” was derived from the name of the [Marquis de Sade](#) due to the nature of his autobiographical sex memoirs.

8] “Wu Meiniang” (武媚娘) is how [Wu Zetian](#) is called when people are referring to her in her youth, which entails her time as a concubine of both Emperors [Taizong](#) and [Gaozong](#) of Tang (Yes, you read right—she was concubine for both the father and the son though she only had children with the son so at least there were no messed up relationships where the half-siblings were also nieces/nephews and aunts/uncles). She is referred to as Empress Wu when discussing her time as Empress-Consort of Gaozong while Wu Zetian is how she is referred to when discussing her time as Empress Regnant of China. Her rule interrupted the Tang Dynasty government ruled by the Li (李) Clan and historical opinion of her has been mixed. Needless to say, she is a very controversial figure in Chinese history.

9] Xiaobao's calling Wu Meiniang/Wu Zetian a devil spirit and implication that she is an untrustworthy mother is a reference to

two historical events, both involving the death of Wu's children. One of the major obstacles to Wu first gaining power and becoming Empress was [Empress Wang](#), Gaozong's original wife, and [Consort Xiao](#), another one of Gaozong's favored concubines and mother of one of his favorite sons, both of whom had teamed up against Wu. Their faction fight culminated in Wu accusing them of being responsible for the death of her newborn daughter who had been mysteriously found dead. There is no definitive proof, even retrospectively using current technologies, about how the daughter died so scholarly speculation is rife on who was actually responsible. One of the prominent theories is that Wu killed her own daughter herself to discredit two of her rivals in a move that was two birds with one stone—three if you consider that Gaozong believed Wu's accusations, deposing Wang from her position, and crowning Wu as Empress soon afterwards. The other event was the death of [Li Hong](#) (李弘), the eldest son of Wu. He was Crown Prince when he died suddenly, leading many traditional scholars to believe that he was poisoned to death by Wu due to his growing independence and defiance of her as they speculate that her motivation was to prevent a future power clash that she would have lost since her son was the legitimate heir. However, it is arguable that this could be unfounded slander being retrospectively made by scholars and historians after her death due to the millennia of patriarchal tradition that Wu's own life flouted though it is also possible that this accusation is true though unproven.

[10\]](#) Xiaoqi means (小七) “little seven.”

[11\]](#) Here, “hou yuan” (後院) is being used for its literal meaning as a backyard but it is also commonly used to refer to the back courtyard houses that the concubines and consorts of the men of the household resided in as an unofficial harem setup. In those

cases, I will translate it as back courtyard house or backcourt or something similar. I will most likely reserve the word “harem” for situations involving royalty or nobility where the women are literally cloistered away with eunuchs standing guard over them.

[12\]](#) The idiom used here is “shou kou ru ping” (守口如瓶), which literally translates to “guard mouth like jar.”

[13\]](#) The meaning of this quote can basically be paraphrased plainly as standing out from the crowd will cause trouble for the one standing out. The first half of this quote is most commonly used and thus better known than the last half; it is to the point where mention of a “tree apart from the forest” is enough of a keyword to get the meaning of the entire quote across. The expression “mu xiu yu lin, feng bi cui zhi; tan gao yu an, liu bi tuan zhi” (木秀於林, 風必摧之; 灘高於岸, 流必湍之) is from the “Yun Ming Lun” (運命論) by Li Kang (李康) of [Wei](#) from the [Warring States period](#). The title of the text roughly translates to “Discussion of Fate.” The text itself survived because it was included in an anthology of works called “[Wen Xuan](#)” (文選), which is usually translated as “Selections of Refined Literature,” that was compiled by [Xiao Tong](#) (蕭統), the Crown Prince of the [Liang Dynasty](#). This compilation was very influential on later scholarly education with its relevance occasionally refreshed by new annotated editions. It was later imported into Japan and became a source of many loanwords in Japanese.

[14\]](#) I’ve translated the term, “yongye tian” (永業田), literally. It can also be referred to as a “shiye tian” (世業田) or “generational industry field,” which was its predecessor. This first appeared in the Sui dynasty as a form of land system. It was granted according to rank with a corresponding obligation in giving the land’s output

to the state. In return, this land typically couldn't be confiscated by the government, was inheritable (hence its name of eternal), and could also be used as an exemption from conscription.

[15\]](#) The leaves of the [mulberry tree](#) (sang shu/桑樹) are the only source of food for [silkworms](#), which are essential to the production of [silk](#) in Chinese [sericulture](#).

[16\]](#) Shiliu uses “ye xiaozi” (野小子) to refer to them. The “ye” (野) that I have translated here as rude has the connotation of uncivilized, feral, and wild.

[17\]](#) The original Chinese used for the nickname, “Song Shan Ren” (宋大善人), combines the surname of Song (宋) with da/大, meaning big or great, and the word that means philanthropist or do-gooder (shanren/善人 literally translates to “benevolent person”). It more directly correlates to “[Good Samaritan](#)” but since this term is actually Biblical in origin while the Chinese phrase has no religious connotations, I felt that it would not be a good translation choice in this case.

Chapter 13: Swindler Appearing Before One's Eyes

Song Jing-gong¹ was originally an orphan. That year, a plague had descended and all the people in the village had died, leaving just his 10 year old self behind. He had begged for food while on the road and suffering the cold looks of other people—he had accepted all of this, too. After all, other people looked down on these types of beggars. The only thing that he couldn't accept was that there were actually people who would beat and curse him, insulting his parents, and hitting him till he was wounded all over.²

There were several times when he had felt like he would nearly die but the Heavens³ seemed to not to wish for him to go like this so he kept on pulling through at the last moment. Until now, he could still remember it. Back then, there was the owner⁴ of a manor who was idle with nothing to do that insisted on releasing the dogs to bite him. Such a large manor actually didn't even have a mouthful of rice to give. He hadn't even entered the courtyard so why release the dogs to bite him?

From then on, he vowed that he would definitely take revenge. First, he went to a few academies that had been established by wealthy families to eavesdrop outside. Later, he discovered that it didn't even matter that he didn't even study that knowledge—it didn't compare to some of the miscellaneous studies. That year that he was 15 years old, he had finally gotten some money by working for other people and had met a sick old man who was near death.

After some effort, he had temporarily saved him, only to discover that old man knew quite a few things. At that point, there was finally someone who could teach him. When he was 20 years old, the old man died. From then on, he made up his mind to use what he had learned to retaliate against those wealthy people. Ten years passed and he had swindled quite a few people as well as helped quite a few people, too.

This time, he had set his goal on the Ge Manor. He had originally thought he could go over and trick someone but the result was that they didn't even heed him at all. Just as he was sulking, he had heard people mention that there were two more manors after crossing the bridge. At once, he got motivated again as he leisurely strode in the direction of the Wang Manor and Zhang Manor.

“Yingtao, even if you can't think it through for the moment, don't panic. This plan of mine is too long so you can just take it bit by bit. Go, take me out again to look at the other places.” While Zhang Xiaobao was striving to groom Yingtao, he saw that puzzled expression on Yingtao's face and realized that he was really being too hasty. So afraid that Yingtao would suffer a blow and thus lose confidence, he kept on patiently explaining again.

“Unh, Little Mister is formidable, I must learn well. Little Mister, in reality, I've never felt that you [honorific] were some monster. It was all that...”

“Yingtao, Older Sister Shiliu over there wants you to carry over Mister Xiaobao. She said that there are matters to discuss.” Just as Yingtao wanted to speak two more sentences with Zhang Xiaobao, a little kid breathlessly ran over as he loudly yelled at Yingtao.

Yingtao recognized this child. He was the child of a family from the manor and was called Xiaoshitou.⁵ Seeing that Xiaoshitou's anxious bearing, she nodded and smiled as she said: "All right, I'll go over there now. Xiaoshitou is a good child."

Hearing such praise, Xiaoshitou shyly rubbed his head with his hands before turning around to run away.

"Little Mister, Shiliu is having us go over there. You [honorific] think we should go or not?" Yingtao didn't know what Shiliu was calling her for, even carrying Little Mister, so she asked for a consultation.

Zhang Xiaobao instantly thought of it. This was definitely not Shiliu's intention. Shiliu dared not call him over there—that needn't be said. So other than Shiliu, Wang Juan was the one left remaining. It was guaranteed that there was an important matter to discuss. He nodded, spreading out his arms to let Yingtao pick him up, as he said: "Let's go over. Hurry a little. There might be something urgent. Have that child that hasn't run far called back here. Ask him what he's seen and what he's heard."

Yingtao picked up Little Mister after calling Xiaoshitou to her to find out. Xiaoshitou naturally didn't know what the matter that Shiliu sent him out to find them for was so he blankly shook his head.

"Not asking you about Shiliu's business. It's that you were playing over there—did you come across anything fun?" Zhang

Xiaobao saw that Yingtao didn't know how to ask so he could only interrupt to speak.

“Little Owner,⁶ I and the others from the manor were playing in the water, ~ne. That was real fun. I—oh, right. We heard that Great Philanthropist Song was coming and we all ran over there. I ran too slowly.” Xiaoshitou was a bit nervous facing the master-family's Little Mister so his speech was a bit stumbling.

“Who is Great Philanthropist Song? He gave you guys stuff for free?” Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaobao felt that there was a bit of a problem. He had always felt that with this word⁷ of philanthropist, if they were true philanthropists, then they wouldn't have any reputation; any who had fame were all not good things.

He had seen too many of these types of people. When there were some natural disasters, they'd advertise how charitable they were and how much money would be doled out. After a round of adulation from the media, they'd have the fame but then, the money was simply not given. He had seen genuine philanthropists before, too. Whichever place needed help, there would be people who drove SUVs equipped with satellite phones, hauling carloads of emergency supplies over there themselves to disperse upon reaching the site. If someone was in danger, they'd make a phone call. Once there was no more stuff, they'd once again drive their car elsewhere to buy more.

So this Great Philanthropist Song definitely didn't belong to the latter group. What was he doing here? Could it be for the sake of creating a reputation?

Just as Zhang Xiaobao was making conjectures, Xiaoshitou spoke again: “Actually, Great Philanthropist Song really is a good person. He helped a lot of needy people but there are always some people who’d say that he’s a swindler. I hear that it’s all people from several wealthy manors that would claim this.”

This mention of his caused Zhang Xiaobao a moment of distraction. Such a familiar feeling. Helping impoverished people and swindling wealthy people—he himself operated like this back then. The problem was that while he was in China, he generally didn’t swindle legitimate business people and only tricked the officials. Could it be that this Great Philanthropist Song sought out only the wealthy as a target? Too extreme—it really was a bit too extreme.

He pondered this on the way until they reached the site of that bridge. Wang Juan and Shiliu were waiting there. Once the two of them met, Wang Juan spoke first: “Xiaobao, Shiliu said that Great Philanthropist Song is a swindler. I think that’s not possible. What do you say, ~ne?”

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaobao understood. Seeing that excited gaze of Wang Juan’s, he could only follow along as he said: “What Juan-Juan said is right. With such a good place, how could there be any swindlers? A philanthropist—definitely a philanthropist, I guarantee it. Let us wait here. A philanthropist shouldn’t do good deeds for just the people on the other side of the bridge.” As he spoke, he glared at Wang Juan, blaming her for her meddling.

But Wang Juan smiled. She really hoped coming over would be a swindler. At that time, they'd encounter Zhang Xiaobao—that would be extremely fun. Swindler? How much skill could the swindlers of this time period have? Even the International Criminal Swindler was honestly doing business, ~ne. Whoever dares swindle had better broaden their horizons.

Considering this yet afraid that swindler wouldn't come over, she said: "Why don't we go over to see?"

"Forget it. Let's not go over there. This side of the bridge is our territory. Over there is someone else's. We should give people a single chance." Zhang Xiaobao overruled this suggestion. If they really went over there, then that would be aggressive. Waiting on this side would be considered defensive. The world had too many people that were eyesores,⁸ so they shouldn't look for trouble when there was none.

Shiliu and Yingtao weren't clear on what the two children were communicating but they were concerned. What if Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan suffered a grievance—that would be trouble, then. They were particularly vigilant against this Swindler Song. Next to them, Shiliu first urged: "Little Mister, that person really is a swindler. Let's stay on this side for a while. If that person comes, ignore him. All right, Little Mister?"

"Shiliu, don't you worry about this type of thing. We'll just play here. If he comes, it'll be natural to know what's happening. Don't always listen to what others say. It'll only do to witness it with your own eyes. The ears hear false, the eyes... The eyes might not be true, either.⁹ In short, just wait." Wang Juan wanted to catch a

swindler right now. It was possibly a professional habit.

While Zhang Xiaobao didn't speak a word as he gazed at the bridge in front of him. Knowing that river passed by the front of his own house, he immediately had another new method to make money. He wanted to implement it yet discovered that the people by his side that he could use really were too few and moreover, the investment this time wouldn't be small. He was calculating at what time to carry it out when from the bridge's opposite side, a person and a group of people surrounding him walked over here.

Upon seeing this person, Wang Juan's eyes lit up. She could guess that person should be Swindler Song—oh, called Great Philanthropist Song. She turned her head to glance at Zhang Xiaobao as Zhang Xiaobao resignedly shook his head and sighed. This person, ~ah, didn't know when to advance or retreat. He originally thought that they wouldn't come over to this side but he didn't think that they'd insist on falling upon their own sword.[10](#) How could this bridge be so easily crossed?

“Little Mister, that's Great Swindler Song. He came over. You [honorific] and Little Miss must not speak. There's no need to heed him.” Shiliu grew nervous, her eyes tightly fixed on that person opposite them, hoping he wouldn't come over.

That person didn't seem to have heard Shiliu's inner desire and finally got on the bridge. His face bearing a smile, he conversed with the people by his side on the one hand while on the other, he sized up the two kids dressed in silk as well as the people carrying the kids. That smile suddenly grew even more brilliant.

Upon seeing that person's smile, Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao also smiled along with him. Wang Juan smiled because she could finally strike a blow against the criminal element while Zhang Xiaobao's smile was a bit wry. There is a road to Heaven that you do not walk and no gate to be cast through to Hell.¹¹ All right, let's brush up on a bit of swindling technique. It's been so long since he'd swindled. Such nostalgia, ~ah.

How could Song Jing-gong know what he would be facing soon? Upon seeing these two kids, he was happy. The people of Ge Manor were afraid; those of this area might not be, especially the kids. It really was great. He had found another type of excuse.

He casually said two sentences with the people beside him before quickly walking over. Song Jing-gong reached a hand into his sleeve to pull out two sugar people;¹² in his mind, the vividly lifelike sugar people would definitely impress the two kids.

Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao were originally still judging whether this Great Philanthropist Song was really like a swindler like how Shiliu described. Now, upon seeing the sugar people, they set a character type for this person. Offering up attention for nothing,¹³ ~ah. His props were even readily at hand. It looked like he was a repeat offender, too.

“Look here, kid. How good. Come, taste this sugar person.” Song Jing-gong waved the two sugar people in front of the kids' eyes as he spoke.

“What person? To even dare take out stuff to give to my family's

Little Mister and Little Miss to eat? You fed up with life?” Seeing that Great Swindler Song had come and was even holding sugar people, Shiliu’s face was chilly as she rebuked him.

Here, Song Jing-gong was even happier. From these words, he could determine the identities of these two kids. He said while staring into the kids’ eyes: “Yes, yes, shouldn’t give this stuff to that Little Mister and Little Miss of yours [honorific] to eat. I’ll stow it away here. These kids really are good looking. I liked them with a glance. Don’t know who you [honorific] are...?”

Notes:

[1\]](#) “Jing-gong” (靜功) works out to mean “quiet/calm, work/power.” It is a name with a scholarly air.

[2\]](#) The idiom used here is “bian ti lin shang” (遍體鱗傷), which literally translates to “everywhere body scaled injury.” It is usually used to describe someone who’s wounded all over with the scales likely a metaphor for the injuries that might result in scabbing or bruising.

[3\]](#) Song Jing-gong uses “Lao Tian Ye” (老天爺), which literally means “Old Heavenly Lord.” But despite the personification implied in the meaning of the name and the existence of various mythological figures that can and have stood in as the ruler of the [Heavens](#) in Chinese folklore, when this particular title is used in speech, it is usually meant in a generic or abstract sense without referring to a specific figure. So though it shares some surface similarities with the broader concept of a [sky-father](#) that is prevalent in Indo-European mythology, it is not nearly as anthropomorphized in Chinese as it is in other cultures. The

closest equivalent anthropomorphized figure in Chinese mythology similar to [Odin](#) or [Zeus](#) would likely be the [Jade Emperor](#), who serves as a ruler of the Celestial Court and acts as the father of a Chinese pantheon of celestial gods and demigods. Also, when the Christian missionaries were translating the Bible and miscellaneous Judeo-Christian concepts into Chinese, many existing Chinese folklore terms were co-opted such as with “[Shangdi](#)” (上帝), which meant “High Deity/Emperor” and referred to an actual deity that the ancient Chinese worshipped, that they used to translate for “Lord” when referring to the Christian God. So some of the terms or names used in Chinese folklore can tend to take on Judeo-Christian connotations when translated into English because of this. Thus, “Lao Tian Ye” (老天爺) can also be used in Chinese Christian text to translate for “Heavenly Father.” For all of these reasons, I am translating this particular term as a neutral and de-personified “Heavens.”

4] The original text uses “dong jia” (東家), which literally translates to “east house” and is typically a way to address superiors like a boss or an owner of the business you are working for and hosts of parties or events where the guests are being invited or treated at the host’s expense. The east part likely is because the sun rises in the east and acts as a source of light just as the owner or host is the origin of wealth or largesse in the relationship. It could also have part of its origins from an ancient Chinese idiom, “dong jia shi xi jia su” (東家食西家宿), that roughly translates to “eating with the East family while sleeping with the West family.” This particular idiom summarizes an anecdote of a beauty from the [Warring States period](#) who had two rival suitors vying for her hand in marriage. The rich but ugly suitor was from the East family while the handsome but poor suitor was from the West family and the beauty was unable to choose, lamenting that if she could, she would eat with the East family one but sleep with the West family one. This proverb is similar in meaning to the

English idiom of “having your cake and eating it, too” but it also has a negative connotation of shameless greed that the English phrase doesn’t necessarily have.

5] “Xiaoshitou” (小石頭) literally translates to “little stone.” Because it could actually be his name rather than a nickname due to the rural naming superstitions for children the Chinese had, I used the pinyin instead of translating it.

6] Xiaoshitou is calling Xiaobao “xiao dong jia” (小東家), which is simply “little” added to the title that he would normally call Xiaobao’s father for being the current head of the Zhang household. This choice of address suggests Xiaoshitou’s family is likely employed by and thus subordinate to the Zhangs but not sold in service to them and thus, free citizens.

7] The Chinese text here is “two words/characters” (liang ge zi/兩個字) but since I have translated shan ren/善人 as “philanthropist,” two words, characters, or syllables no longer fit this situation.

8] The Chinese used here is “bu shun yan” (不順眼) and literally means “not smooth (to the) eye.” Similar to the intent behind “finding favor” in someone in English, to find someone smooth to the eye was to find favor in them. So the opposite would be looking at them and finding them unpleasant to the eye or an eyesore—like how some fights can be picked for no apparent reason just because one side simply thought that the other side had looked at them in a way that they took offense to.

9] The proverb Wang Juan was about to quote in full here is “er ting wei xu, yan jian wei shi” (耳聽為虛, 眼見為實), which basically

means that what your ears hear is false and what your eyes see is true. It is typically used as a warning against believing too much in the veracity of rumors, gossip, or hearsay while advising the listener to believe only what they see (i.e. experience it themselves) and judge the truth for themselves. However, Juan-Juan corrects herself here because modern knowledge (and probably her own personal experience working cases) tells her that the [testimony of an eyewitness](#) might not be indisputable, either.

[10\]](#) The expression Xiaobao uses here of “wang qiang kou shang zhuang” (往槍口上撞) means to collide on top of a spear point and describes someone who is essentially impaling themselves on a spear. By the way, qiang/槍, which is the name of the [Chinese spear](#), was reused as the Chinese word for gun so ancient idioms that use qiang/槍 can also take on the newer meaning of the word and thus new connotations. If translating this phrase for the meaning of gun, then a similar image would likely be “colliding with the muzzle of a gun.” This idiom is generally used to describe acts that are suicidally stupid or asking for trouble though the intent of the person who is doing so isn’t necessarily to seek death. Because the imagery of the English idiom of “[falling on one’s sword](#)” was so similar, I opted to use this in the translation despite the fact that this English expression does have a connotation of an intended suicide so it is likely an imperfect replacement.

[11\]](#) Xiaobao is quoting a common saying here, “tian tang you lu ni bu zou, di yu wu men tou jin lai” (天堂有路你不走, 地獄無門投進來), which is usually a one-liner to throw at someone the speaker thinks is dooming themselves to a fate worse than death by denying themselves a path to Heaven as well as the gate to Hell. I haven’t found any clear literary source or origin for this saying although versions of this expression are often quoted in various Chinese literature (usually fictitious novels) so it is likely an

expression that circulated through the spoken vernacular before being put to paper.

[12\] Sugar people](#) (tang ren/糖人) are a type of Chinese handcraft, art, and edible sweet made using liquid sugar. It uses the caramel color of the sugar itself along with yellow or green dyes in its art. It is generally sold in public food stalls so buyers can request what figures they wish to be made or simply watch the artist create one.

[13\]](#) The expression used here is “wu shi xian yin qin” (無事獻殷勤), which translates to “no thing offering hidden industry,” and the meaning conveyed is roughly like the one found in the English phrase “[There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.](#)” Basically, the Chinese saying describes someone who is attentive and industrious for no apparent reason so it warns that there is a hidden motive for such behavior.

Chapter 14: Being Able To Cheat A Bit Is A Bit

Song Jing-gong wanted to thoroughly investigate in order to make the swindle easier later on. While he made his inquiries, his eyes stared into the eyes of the two kids. He originally assumed that upon seeing such pretty sugar people, these two kids would make a fuss to get them. He even came up with how to respond then. As long as the kids liked him, he would succeed at the first step.

Alas, what he saw was that the two kids' eyes only gave the sugar people a once over and then ignored them to look at him. They even smiled sweetly. Only, why did that smile feel not right—unless little kids all smiled this way? It was a bit cold.

“Who are you? I’m Zhang Manor’s Little Mister.” Zhang Xiaobao batted those innocent big eyes twice as he curiously asked.

Wang Juan also tilted her head in concert with Zhang Xiaobao as she asked: “Right, ~ya.¹ You’re who, ~ya? I’m Wang Manor’s Little Miss.”

Hearing these voices that slurred the words a bit, Song Jing-gong was not a bit surprised. He believed that the family members of these two kids must have taught them how to speak. Families with a bit of money were all like this—always feeling that their own children were stronger than other people’s so they’d teach them a few sentences to get more praise from others.

Thinking of this, Song Jing-gong made a very funny face in order to make the two children laugh. But the result was that the two children both turned their heads. This affirmed even more his internal speculation. Sure enough, they weren't kids that were that smart.

In actuality, Wang Juan was turning her head because she saw that when this Song Jing-gong made a funny face, his teeth were still stained with stuff so she was disgusted while Zhang Xiaobao wasn't willing to speak any more with this person. Swindling—it didn't even require him to give any kind of guidance. He thought that this swindler was preparing to go to his house to deceive the adults.

Upon seeing the two kids' appearances, Song Jing-gong felt that he couldn't use the original method after all and could only turn to the two young girls who were probably maid servants and say: "I'm called Song Jing-gong. Seeing how good your family's Little Mister and Little Miss are, I suddenly decided that I wanted to help your two manors a bit. Quickly bring me to go see your patriarch."

"With just you? And you even want to see our patriarch? You're dreaming, ~ne? If I were you, I'd leave here immediately. Our manor doesn't need your kind of people coming here." Shiliu coldly looked at Song Jing-gong and scoffed, leaving not a shred of compassion as she spoke.

Over there, Yingtao was the same. Confronting Song Jing-gong like an enemy, she hugged Zhang Xiaobao tightly in her embrace as she turned her head to look elsewhere.

‘Failure—it really is too much of a failure being a swindler to this kind of degree. The other person is already on guard, how could a swindler still keep working? Yingtao and Shiliu are not bad though—they know how to judge people and help the family avoid quite a bit of danger.’ Zhang Xiaobao held back his smile while using his head to rub against Yingtao’s neck.

Yingtao liked these two children so seeing that cute appearance of Little Mister’s and feeling that Shiliu wouldn’t go tell Mistress after seeing it, she turned her head to kiss Zhang Xiaobao on the face.

Over there, seeing such a situation, Wang Juan was afraid that Song Jing-gong wouldn’t go swindling—how could she nab a swindler, then? So she could only say to Shiliu: “Go home. I want to go home.”

Shiliu was also of this intention and turned around to return while carrying Wang Juan, not even sparing a look at Song Jing-gong. Yingtao naturally followed after her.

Seeing that the two maid servants were carrying the kids away, Song Jing-gong wasn’t angered a bit. He smiled and also followed afterwards, walking toward that side. Seeing this, the kids, who had been watching the excitement just now, returned back to the river on this side and jumped down one after the other to resume with their games—all not willing to continue following them. Those adults who had tagged along, discovering that it wasn’t their own manor anymore, also turned around to go back.

“What are you doing, following us?” After walking a portion of

the way, Shiliu discovered that this Great Swindler Song was actually following after them and stopping in her tracks, she turned her head around in a furious query.

“When was I following? Could it be that this manor being your family’s mean that I can’t walk on the road? It’s not like I’m going into your family’s courtyard.” Song Jing-gong didn’t care one bit as he laughingly spoke.

“Then, go on and follow. You, don’t hope to trick our family’s Mistress. My family’s Mistress won’t even get taken in by you.” Shiliu bluntly pointed out the facts, speeding up as she walked back while carrying Wang Juan, prepared to call on the footmen once at the courtyard to drive him away. If she had known they would encounter this swindler, she would have brought along a few people when they came out.

“This maiden might be thinking wrongly. I, this Song,² have never tricked people before. It would only do to have proof whenever you speak. Otherwise, I’ll sue you in court. At any rate, I am also of the honorary title of Juren.”³ Song Jing-gong responded with a threat.

“Unh, a swindler is a swindler. Who knows how that Juren of yours came about?” Shiliu quietly muttered. This time, she really couldn’t continue insulting Song Jing-gong. She knew that Juren were not good to provoke after all. Even her own family’s Master still didn’t have such an identity right now, ~ne.

Seeing that the two maid servants were scared, Song Jing-gong

was gloating. This Juren identity was really useful, ~ah. He'd swindled so many people and yet, wasn't it because they couldn't get a handle⁴ on him and also because of his own identity that they had no way to get a court suit?

"Juren, ~ah! Xiaobao, you able to beat him?" Wang Juan was being carried by Shiliu up front so she turned her head around to face Zhang Xiaobao as she used lip-speech to speak to him.

"Juren counts as what fart? Back when I was swindling, the group of doctorates subordinate to me had four that were previously the valedictorians⁵ in the nationwide high school test.⁶ Dare to swindle my family? I'll let him know why the flowers are so red.⁷ You leave first, I'll delay him. You return and tell my Mom about things on this side. Have my Mom prepare a bit. Divide the talks into several times." Having met a swindler, Zhang Xiaobao didn't want to just let him go, either. Since he'd arrived, then they'd entertain him thoroughly. The benefit of having Wang Juan going back first with the news and dividing the talks up into several times was that they could have time for discussion.

"All right, I'll have Shiliu walk quickly. You're not making preparations? Looking at the jade ornament⁸ hanging from his waist, you can guess that he's probably succeeded many times." Wang Juan nodded slightly as she asked.

"Go on your way. I prepare for what? How many tricks does he have? Compared to me, he's not even on the same level. I'll definitely let him experience who exactly is the ancestor of swindlers. Unh, this question is a bit profound."⁹ Zhang Xiaobao

was completely open today as well while he joked around with Wang Juan.

After hearing the words Wang Juan spoke in her ear, Shiliu increased her speed, almost running as she left first. Song Jing-gong didn't know what matter had appeared and wanted to chase her but he also wanted to follow this little boy. While he was still unsure as to how to decide, Zhang Xiaobao spoke up.

“Lie, liar.”¹⁰ When these three syllables popped out of Zhang Xiaobao's mouth, Zhang Xiaobao even accompanied them with a gesture by using a finger to point at Song Jing-gong.

“Little Mister, I'm not a liar. I'm a good person.” Song Jing-gong was really scared now. He wasn't scared of the two maid servants talking on their return. He trusted in his own ability to get the person managing the affairs of that manor to listen to his great money-making plan. But he was afraid of this kid speaking—especially since he was a small boy. He had already found out from the mouths of the people of that Ge Manor that the Zhang Manor on this side only had one boy in this generation.

What does a boy mean? All of the adoration is focused on this kid's person. At that time, not to mention if he really did want to go swindling, even if he didn't swindle, one word from this kid could let those who were his parents change their minds. There was an aphorism that was the most convincing for people and that was that when kids looked at people, they could tell good from bad, especially with kids that still didn't have any comprehension as they said that it was when the kids' hearts were purest, their eyes the cleanest.

Song Jing-gong didn't wish to have his previous work come to naught just because of one kid so he inwardly deliberated on how to let this kid come to like him as that would make things easy. He thought and then took out a little toy sword made out of peach wood¹¹ from his sleeves. There was even a red string on top. Using his hand to grasp one end of the string, he swung the sword in front of Zhang Xiaobao's eyes.

Zhang Xiaobao gave a "he-he" in laughter and didn't look at that toy sword. Instead, he pointed at Song Jing-gong as he said: "Money, money."

If Wang Juan were here, she'd definitely be laughing to the point of gasping for air. This Zhang Xiaobao was really too ruthless.

Song Jing-gong wasn't Wang Juan so he naturally didn't know what he was about to face. Hearing such a little kid call for money, he felt that it should have been taught by the adults in his family. To start having kids know about money from such a small age, he definitely had to swindle this kind of family. Unh, he must pass the obstacle of the kid he was facing. He wanted money? Fine, he'd give money.

Thinking this, Song Jing-gong took out a copper coin from within his sleeve. On it was written 'Kaiyuan Tongbao.' He laughingly gave it to Zhang Xiaobao.

Upon seeing that it was only 1 wen [cash], Zhang Xiaobao didn't even think and waved a small hand to knock this coin down to the

ground as he continued pointing at Song Jing-gong to say: “Silver, silver.”

Yingtao hugged Little Mister—she’d originally intended to directly and quickly leave but she had listened to Little Mister’s words just now telling her to slowly hang about in back and to not mind anything else, so she could only endure the ‘harassment’ of this Great Swindler Song.

Song Jing-gong picked up that copper coin that had been knocked down while he cursed inwardly. This little bit of a kid had already started recognizing silver, could it be that the masters of the manor had nothing to do but throw the kid on a pile of money? Gritting his teeth, he dug out the 1 tael or more of silver pieces and reluctantly placed it in front of Zhang Xiaobao.

Zhang Xiaobao wasn’t modest, either, freely accepting it as he continued calling for silver. Then, seeing that helpless gaze of Song Jing-gong’s and feeling that he didn’t seem to have any more silver, began to call for money. Song Jing-gong still had money. Not much—only 100 wen [cash] as too much would be too heavy. He took that out too, handing it over to Zhang Xiaobao.

Now, this was heavier than the silver from before. Zhang Xiaobao struggled to use both of his hands to hold onto the money string, placing it in between himself and Yingtao, sandwiching it just right, before his eyes locked onto the jade ornament at Song Jing-gong’s waist. The string of the jade ornament was tied to the waist with the jade falling at the thigh to weigh down on the clothing.^{[12](#)}

Zhang Xiaobao just stared at it intently, not speaking at all. Song Jing-gong suddenly felt uncomfortable inside and not knowing why, he followed the kid's gaze to see the jade ornament. If Zhang Xiaobao had stared at the jade ornament from the start, then Song Jing-gong would definitely not give it away. After all, it was bought for 5 guan [strings of cash]—no matter how bad the jade was, it was still not cheap.

Zhang Xiaobao was currently using psychology. This was called gaining a cun [inch] to advance a chi [foot],¹³ getting it little by little. You already gave a bit anyway; you still lack the other bit? This was only because Zhang Xiaobao's age was too small. If he were slightly bigger, he could have used gaining a chi [foot] to gain a cun [inch].¹⁴ Start out by asking for a little more. If you didn't give it, then ask for a bit less to let you feel like you couldn't keep on rejecting it and so, comply with the latter relatively smaller request.

How could Song Jing-gong know these things, ~ah? He was furthermore unable to realize what kind of person the kid in front of him was. So resolving his heart, he took off the jade ornament, too. He was roughly panting as he handed it over, thinking that this time if he didn't swindle hundreds of silver taels, then he would not desist at all.

Notes:

¹ The “~ya” (呀) here is another one of those ending sentence particles that can be added for emphasis. It can be used to lengthen the sentence to add a drawling effect, to emphasize the exclamation in the sentence, or a verbal tic. Because of this, I will sometimes leave it in for effect.

2] Song Jing-gong is using a Chinese [illeism](#) that is typically created by combining the speaker's surname and “mo” (某) meaning “some” as in “somebody” to make “this [insert surname].” So Song Jing-gong is saying “Song mo” (宋某). To reproduce the effect of this third person pronoun he is using to refer to himself while still keeping the flow of the sentence relatively smooth, I have translated it as “this Song.”

3] I decided to use the pinyin for “ju ren” (舉人), which is one of the [scholarly degrees](#) that can be conferred through the civil exams to those who had passed exams at the prefectural level. It literally means “elevated/promoted person/man” and was granted to those who passed the provincial level exam given every 3 years. Though some translations attempt to equate it with one of the different college certificates one can obtain after a set number of years of study like a Bachelor's or Master's degree, I chose not to do so because the degrees and titles that the civil exams awarded were very subjective in their standards and different from the more structured curriculums a student must undertake before being granted a college diploma at any level versus the situation with the civil exams where one could earn a degree without any prerequisite amount of study so long as they passed the civil exams or end up never passing it at all even after a lifetime of study, making it hard to make them easy 1:1 replacements in my opinion. Passing the exam to earn a scholarly title depended on a number of factors, of which the years of schooling undergone only served as a rough guideline as to what to expect in terms of the duration of a typical education but other variables like luck, connections, and timing could all come into play. Schooling also varied since a successful candidate could be completely self-taught or home-schooled rather than educated by attending private academies or other such educational institutions. How the exams were set up

meant that a man who was just as educated and skilled as a man who had earned a degree could still end up not passing because they might have espoused a viewpoint or preferred a writing style that the grading official disliked or disagreed with; they might simply have ended up taking the test in years where there were too many qualified candidates or lived in a highly competitive area where they couldn't rise above the crowd to make the cut-off point but they would have passed if they took the test when there weren't as many skilled candidates or in an area where the competition level was much lower. Corruption and cheating were also possible variables that could affect a candidate's success. In a way, the civil exams were a bit like how the [Oscars](#) are set up as the winner chosen was dependent on the available slate of candidates that year so one year's winners could be considered lower in quality in comparison to another year's simply because they won during a year with lower quality candidates and they happened to be the best of the available slate that year.

4] “Ba bing” (把柄) can describe a physical handle but it can also be used as a metaphor in Chinese to mean a weakness that gives enemies a “handle” to get a hold on you such as in a blackmail or hostage situation.

5] “[Zhuang yuan](#)” (狀元) was the rank given to the highest scoring person on the civil exams at the national level. This title then broadened in usage to apply to people who were the top in their field or the top scorer on the test in modern Chinese. Since valedictorian describes the student with the top grade in a graduating class in English, I have opted for a translation rather than using the pinyin in this case.

6] “Quan Guo Gao Kao” (全國高考), which is further shortened

into gaokao/高考 (literally meaning “high test”), is a colloquial name for the [National High Education Entrance Exams](#). It is a nationwide admissions exam that Chinese high school students take in order to determine their eligibility for entering the college or university of their choice by testing their knowledge in various subject areas. This is the modern incarnation of the Imperial era civil exams—only, the promise of governmental positions have been divorced from this test for the most part (it is arguable that students with political ambitions could use their test results to enter schools that would further those goals). It is similar to the [SATs](#) or [ACTs](#) in the U.S. except even more stressful since the high school admissions test results are generally the only criterion that Chinese universities will consider when accepting prospective students. Due to the influence of the [Sinosphere](#) which spread the concept of these exams from Imperial China to other countries that then later evolved into their modern-day versions, high school students in [Japan](#), [South Korea](#), and other countries have to undergo a similarly nerve-wracking experience to the point that there is anecdotal evidence of the drastic measures that the governments will sometimes take in order to minimize the level of disturbance suffered by test-takers. This is literally how important the test is deemed to the future of the high school students and how stressful the situation is—the entire country shuts up and rearranges its schedule just for this one test.

7] Showing someone why the flowers are so red (hua-er wei she me zhe me hong/花兒為什麼這麼紅) is likely a reference to the oft-used poetic imagery of blood staining flowers red, especially since in Chinese, “seeing red” (jian hong/見紅) is used to describe blood or bleeding (though it can also be slang for being lucky since red is considered a lucky color). So someone who says this might be threatening physical violence. Or they could be joking since this turn of phrase has been used so frequently that it can be a bit meme-tastic to the point of parody. I’m not sure if this is

coincidental or not but there is also a song of a similar name, “Hua-er Wei She Me Zhe Yang Hong” (花兒為什麼這樣紅), that was used in a [1963 Chinese film](#) called “Bing Shan Shang de Lai Ke” (冰山上的來客) or “Visitor on Ice Mountain.” It was a relatively popular song and has more recently shown up in a couple of China’s competitive singing TV shows [A YouTube video of an older rendition of the song can be found [here](#)].

[8\]](#) A “yu pei” (玉佩) is a brooch or pendant-like ornament made out of [jade](#). Unlike brooches which are pinned onto a lapel or pendants which are a type of necklace, these ornaments are usually designed to be hung off the waist like a belt weight or attached to accessories like fans, similarly to how some people can decorate their cell phones or keychains by attaching little charms to them. They can be considered good luck charms as well as be a display of wealth or status.

[9\]](#) Because the Chinese practice [ancestor worship](#), Xiaobao is bragging in a roundabout way that he is the god of swindlers. Until he realized the time travel aspect of his reincarnation made a paradox out of the literal meaning of his words...

[10\]](#) Xiaobao is saying “pian zi” (騙子), which I have chosen to translate as “swindler” in the overall novel. However, because he is playing up his physical age in this instance, I chose to use “liar” as the translation in this context as liar would be a more believable choice for a normal kid of his age to know and speak. The pian/騙 in “pian zi” (騙子) just means deception or deceit so my translation is dependent on the context of the sentence that describes what kind of deception the deceiver is doing in particular. Since most of the deception in this novel has to do with cheating money out of people, I usually choose to translate it as swindle or swindler.

[11\]](#) Peach wood or “tao mu” (桃木) is considered to have properties that can ward off evil in China. This is likely because the peach is a positive symbol in Chinese culture. So the swords made out of [peach](#) wood that Daoist priests use in their rituals tend to feature heavily as a prop in real life as well as in Chinese fantasy films with ghosts or spirits.

[12\]](#) Song Jing-gong is likely wearing a long robe with flowing layers and voluminous sleeves, which would mark him as a scholar or a member of the leisure class in comparison to the peasants who would be wearing more practical clothing with shorter hems that are actually similar to modern-day clothing attire that wouldn't get in the way of their work. So having an ornament that could act as a weight would be a necessary accessory for him to prevent the clothing flaps of his robes from flying all over the place in a strong wind or with the motion of the body. Go [here](#) to read more about [Han Chinese clothing](#).

[13\]](#) An English expression with a roughly equivalent meaning to “de cun jin chi” (得寸進尺) would be the one based off of the [Scottish inch](#), the modern version of which is usually rendered as “Give him an inch and he'll take a mile.” I marked the [cun](#) as [inch] and [chi](#) as [foot] since they are known as the Chinese versions of these measurements of length from the [Imperial system](#) as well as to remind people which unit is the smaller or larger unit. They aren't actually equivalent to a foot or an inch and are too variable in measurement though for me to convert them to a Western system.

[14\]](#) Xiaobao came up with “de chi jin cun” (得尺進寸) by inverting the front and back halves of the previous 4-character couplet,

which is a common form of wordplay in Chinese.

Chapter 15: Settling Down Anxieties Within The Heart

Bearing a dream of making another fortune, Song Jing-gong followed along after Yingtao while periodically directing a smile at Zhang Xiaobao that Zhang Xiaobao would respond to with an even cuter smile. With a peaceful atmosphere, the three people arrived outside that manor courtyard of the Zhang family. Having already received the report as well as subjective opinion of Wang Juan beforehand, Mrs. Zhang-Wang didn't come out to welcome this time. Even if Song Jing-gong urgently requested it, it was still only Steward Zhang who came out as the representative.

“Little Mister, whose stuff is this that you [honorific] are holding in hand? We shouldn't take someone else's things. Quickly, return it.” According to his instructions, Steward Zhang spoke as planned upon catching sight of Little Mister. This caused Zhang Xiaobao to start for a moment. He clearly didn't tell anyone beforehand that he would swindle money and items, how could Steward Zhang know of such a ‘status quo?’

Of course, Zhang Xiaobao wouldn't return the money or items. Since they had come to swindle, then they should be conscious of being swindled. Fully playing along, he allowed Steward Zhang to take the silver coins and jade ornament from out of his grasp to hand over to Song Jing-gong while his gaze traveled along with the objects. Just as Song Jing-gong was happy that his own stuff was about to be returned, he suddenly blurted out: “Lie, lie...”

“Steward Zhang, you [honorific] look at what words you [honorific] are saying. Your Little Mister is so cute; I'm gifting this

to him here. With such a little plaything, why be this way? To tell you [honorific] the truth, once I saw Little Mister, I felt like we share an affinity.”¹ Song Jing-gong, seeing that when the items in this little kid’s grasp were gone, he would be called a liar again, how could he dare take the things back? He placed it into his hands to give to Zhang Xiaobao again.

Seeing that the other person’s Little Mister had regained his smile, he felt a full-body weakness from the fright he had suffered while Steward Zhang smiled as he nodded his head and said: “Mister Song, if that’s the case, then thank you very much. Oh, Mister Song has come from afar. Why not enter the courtyard house to rest for a bit before making any other plans?”

These words sounded like they had a bit of an intention of rejection but Song Jing-gong didn’t refute them one bit. He had arrived with a motive so he immediately struck while the iron was hot:² “If that’s so, then I’ll be imposing. Coincidentally, I desire to discuss a great business deal with the person managing the affairs of your noble manor.”

Steward Zhang didn’t say anything else, only replying that he would return to make a report. After leading the person to the parlor, he turned to leave.

Zhang Xiaobao got down from Yingtao’s embrace as he walked back, step by step, wanting to find Steward Zhang to ask how they knew that he had swindled stuff.

In a room, Wang Juan was being held by Mrs. Zhang-Wang as

she kept calling Mom [in-law] with each breath. To tell the truth, she didn't like being this way. But for the sake of a good lifestyle, she must be wed to Zhang Xiaobao. She would not allow herself to be wed to an individual who couldn't even keep up with her thinking when speaking to her. From now until growing up and marrying was a time for nurturing their feelings and understanding each other's worlds. To have the same language and ideals, being together in the end wouldn't be hard—she'd just treat it as an experience of this new dynasty era.

“Mom [in-law], even if that swindler is exposed, don't report it to the officials. Don't know how much money Xiaobao will swindle this time?” Wang Juan tried her best to make herself speak a bit more familiarly, even if she had no way of adapting to this identity.

“All right, I'll listen to Juan-Juan. Can Juan-Juan tell Mom [in-law] how you knew Xiaobao would be able to swindle money?” Mrs. Zhang-Wang had already discovered that this future daughter-in-law and son were overly intelligent. But so what? Xiang Tuo became Confucius' teacher at 7,³ Gan Luo became Senior Minister at 12;⁴ weren't her own son and daughter-in-law allowed to be a bit bright?

“Ah? It was Xiaobao who told me before coming back.” Wang Juan replied in answer. She obviously couldn't say that she understood this swindler and had done quite a bit of investigation so that if this kind of person didn't cheat a swindler that they had met from head to toe, then that would only sully the reputation of an International Swindler.

Zhang Xiaobao wandered through a few rooms and asked the servants but he couldn't find Steward Zhang in the end and could only return to ask Wang Juan. He trusted that Wang Juan absolutely could not avoid involvement with this. As expected, upon walking through the door, he saw Wang Juan, who was being carried by his mother, use lip-speech to ask him: "How much money did you swindle? Split it in half."

Zhang Xiaobao could only sigh. Understanding each other too well wasn't a good thing either as there were no secrets. Ignoring Wang Juan, he spread his little hands outward while walking toward his mother and cried out: "Mom, Xiaobao has returned." His call was natural, ~ah, causing Wang Juan to be unable to avoid shuddering. Thinking of Zhang Xiaobao's prior age, she secretly slandered him in that it must certainly be that his mind had issues.

At this moment, Steward Zhang was currently interrogating Xiaoqi who had been secured within a room while being accompanied by two house guards.

"Talk. Who sent you to spread rumors? What you signed was a death contract.⁵ If you don't talk, there won't be anyone investigating, even if you're beaten to death." Steward Zhang's face had now transformed from the respect displayed in front of Mistress to a face that was as overcast as water.⁶ Being the Steward of Zhang Manor, he shared glory as one and shared ruin as one with the Zhang Family. This position had been passed down from generation to generation. At the manor, he had his own courtyard house with his parents, wife, and children. He forbade anyone else destroying this kind of happiness.

Xiaoqi didn't have his own surname and didn't know who his parents were, either. He had been an orphan ever since he could remember. Later, he had been captured by people and then sold to the Zhang Manor. Food, clothing, and housing didn't require him to spend money and every month, he could even get 10-something wen [cash] in wage. This was treatment he only received after working for 10 years. Upon hearing the steward's question and then looking at the other two people behind him bearing equally mean-looking expressions, he fearfully fell to his knees with a thumping sound.

"Steward Zhang, I didn't. I've never spread whatever rumors. What things are you [honorific] talking about?" Xiaoqi simply didn't know what wrong he had committed and even assumed that Steward Zhang was deliberately finding fault with him, ~ne.

"Looks like you won't be telling the truth. Little Mister and Little Miss Wang are monsters—could it be that it wasn't spread from your mouth? Let him know about formidability." Steward Zhang stared at Xiaoqi and with a gesture, the two people behind him rushed forward.

Song Jing-gong waited in the parlor for an entire full hour before Steward Zhang finally returned.

"Mister Song, really beg your pardon. Just a moment ago, Mistress actually couldn't be found so I went outside to look, only to return now as a result. Alas, Mistress experienced overexertion and so, after feeding Little Mister, has already retired. Don't know what matter Mister Song has? This little one shall certainly inform Mistress of it." Steward Zhang finished grilling Xiaoqi, then came

to the parlor and spoke thusly to Song Jing-gong. This was also arranged beforehand.

Song Jing-gong had no way of guessing if these words were dependable or not. After considering it, he decided not to speak of it with this steward and could only seek out the next opportunity. He must come tomorrow. At the very least, he couldn't spend that money and jade ornament in vain. So he said: "No harm. Since your noble manor's Mistress is not in, I don't know if I could see your family's Master?" He was still unwilling to let his hopes die here.

"Master never bothers with the trifling affairs of the manor; everything that should be taken care of is managed by Mistress. Unless Mister Song is talking about matters of scholarship? Then naturally, you could seek out Master." Steward Zhang's reply was also airtight against any leaks.

"No, no, not scholarship. It's business, big business."

"Oh, is that so? Then, I request that Mister Song please come back the following day. Mister, drink tea." Steward Zhang here was driving off a guest.

Waiting until Song Jing-gong had turned around and left, Steward Zhang gazed at that slightly reluctant back silhouette as he coldly laughed once and said to himself: "Dare to aim your attentions at my house? At that time, you'll know formidability."

"So, he's not a villain who was dispatched by other people to the

manor and was actually having an affair with a maid servant of the manor. This is easily handled—just drive them out of the manor is all.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang received the steward’s report. That Xiaoqi hadn’t been sent here by other people but had heard Master’s words and as a result of wanting to cajole a maid servant of the manor called Xiaohong,⁷ he blabbed these words to prove that he knew a lot of things.

Hearing the beginning and end of this matter at the same time, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan also breathed a sigh of relief. No one was willing to have fire break out in their own backyard when they were working hard to develop an enterprise. In regards to his mother’s approach, Zhang Xiaobao didn’t agree but could only suggest: “Mom can’t have Xiaoqi driven out. What if he harbored resentment and talked about this everywhere—that would be bad. Rather beat him dead than let him go.”

“Don’t need to beat him to death. Since he’s good with that Xiaohong or whatever, then just ask Xiaohong what they intend. If they’re both like this, then just betroth the two of them.” Wang Juan, seeing that Zhang Xiaobao wanted to commit murder for the sake of removing a hidden danger, quickly prevented it.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang looked at her son and then looked at her daughter-in-law before happily kissing their two faces again and again: “Good, we’ll listen to Juan-Juan. My son and Juan-Juan can actually say so many words like a grownup. Even if you’re monsters, Mom will accept it. Where would you go to find such dear monsters? It’s really all your Dad’s fault. He had to say that word. Wait a bit; Mom will go find your Dad to have a talk.”

Having finished talking and fed the two children, Mrs. Zhang-Wang really did go seek out Father Zhang. But she didn't go by herself and called up Mom [in-law] and Old Master with a slight appearance of wishing to make a public trial of his crimes.⁸

Of course, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan didn't care about other people as they lay down there, holding back the sleepiness overtaking them to discuss matters for later on.

"These ideas of yours are one after another. Do you intend to take them all out? Altogether, there are only two people working. How could Yingtao and Erniu know of so many things? They'll get exhausted silly." Wang Juan felt that if Zhang Xiaobao continued like this, the expansion would be too quick so she was giving advice there.

"It is a bit much. Then, just have Erniu's family manage the affairs of that paste sauce, Yingtao will raise the chickens, the earthworms and other miscellaneous stuff will be given to Shiliu. But then, wouldn't we have nobody by our side again? Actually, it isn't that I want to expand so quickly. If we weren't in the 2nd year of Kaiyuan right now and were 2 years earlier, I could still go slowly. But time doesn't abide me,⁹ ~ah." Zhang Xiaobao sighed as he spoke.

"I don't believe it, ~ne. I feel that even if it were 2 years earlier, you would still say this. Just like how some people who would always say if I were only younger, I would be like this or that. Even waiting until they age bit by bit, they would still be like this." Wang Juan basically treated Zhang Xiaobao's words with disbelief.

Zhang Xiaobao turned over to lie there, pressing his face to the mat as he said with a hum: “Really, I’m afraid that Li Longji will take my family’s land. My family doesn’t pay any taxes on those 100 heads. If the land’s gone, what do the people of the manor do? Keep them? Those taxes are paid per head—how much money is required every day, ~ah! Don’t keep them; my Grandpa, Grandma, as well as my Dad and Mom, who’d wait on them? They’re people who’ve grown used to being waited on; I’m worried that they wouldn’t be able to take it.”

“Even if you have to earn it, you still want to buy such a big plot of land with this little money?”

“This money isn’t enough, of course. I need a foundation. At that time, there’d naturally be a way to get rich. I won’t speak of it with you beforehand. Otherwise, you’ll mourn the heavens and pity the people¹⁰ again. Anyway, it’s not by swindling.” Zhang Xiaobao continued explaining.

“Who cares? If you won’t speak of it, then don’t speak of it. Don’t tell me in the future ever again. Think on that Great Swindler Song, then.” Wang Juan said as if in a pique.

“What’s to worry about a swindler? It’s those of you who are officials that are formidable. How did I not think about using delays, ~ne? That is indeed bureaucracy. Delaying him a few days is fine. I’m impressed.” Zhang Xiaobao praised. This was because today’s delaying tactic was Wang Juan’s own idea. If it were up to Zhang Xiaobao’s thinking, they’d just be swindling each other directly.

“What do you understand? This is called battle strategy. Sleep, we still need to continue training in the afternoon.”

Notes:

[1\]](#) The phrase Song Jing-gong uses here is “you yuan” (有緣), which can be translated as destined or fated. It can describe a romantic destiny but can also refer to serendipitous encounters that lead to lasting friendships. Since Song Jing-gong is trying to claim that he likes Xiaobao enough to want to befriend him in order to curry favor with the Zhang household, I chose to translate his turn of phrase as “sharing an affinity.”

[2\]](#) The expression Song Jing-gong uses is “da she sui gun shang” (打蛇隨棍上). This Chinese turn of phrase is essentially describing someone acting quickly like someone striking a snake with a stick before it can react. I replaced it with a roughly equivalent English expression as suggested by a reader.

[3\]](#) Mrs. Zhang-Wang is referencing a point in Chinese history where a 7 year old genius named Xiang Tuo (項橐) was so intelligent that Confucius treated the little boy as his teacher (項橐七歲為孔師). This anecdote is supposed to be an illustration of Confucius’ humility as he had already taught several students himself and was considered a master sage at this point in his life but he still wasn’t arrogant enough to assume that he knew more than a 7 year old child prodigy who had wisdom of his own. The historical veracity of this account is corroborated in terms of being mentioned in several Chinese texts of the period as well as in several classical histories. However, the actual details of the event and how it became well known enough to be recorded for posterity is unknown. It is likely a situation similar to how everyone knows

[Sir Isaac Newton first thought of the concept of gravity by having an apple hit his head even though that might not be what exactly happened.](#) However, as this story is universally accepted as the truth in Chinese culture, Xiang Tuo became one of the oft-cited examples of a boy genius.

4] Gan Luo (甘羅) becoming a Senior Minister at the age of 12 is another common example cited in Chinese history of a child prodigy (甘羅十二成上卿). Senior Minister is how I have translated the position of “shang qing” (上卿) that is mentioned in the phrase. Qing/卿 is a ministerial title that falls underneath the [Three Lords and Nine Ministers](#) governmental system of ancient China and was divided into upper (shang/上), middle (zhong/中), and lower (xia/下) graded ranks. Sometimes, Gan Luo is said to have become a prime minister or chancellor in a mistranslation or exaggeration of “shang qing” (上卿), usually for the purposes of drama. Historical mention of this event can be found in the [71st volume of biographies](#) of the [Records of the Grand Historian](#) or “Taishi Gong Shu” (太史公書), which is also known as “The Scribe’s Records” (Shiji/史記) for short, authored by [Sima Qian](#) (司馬遷) of the [Han Dynasty](#).

5] Siqi/死契 is the term for a lifetime contract that remains valid until the death of the contractor. In this case, Steward Zhang is stating that Xiaoqi sold himself to the Zhang household for the duration of his lifetime.

6] The expression used to describe Steward Zhang’s facial expression is “mian chen si shui” (面沉似水), which is comparing his facial expression to that of the deep or dark water surface. The adjective of chen/沉 in this phrase is also commonly used to describe gloomy or overcast weather, hence my translation choice.

7] Xiaohong (小紅) means “little red.”

8] “Xing shi wen zui” (興師問罪) is a Chinese idiom describing a situation when a crowd or mob of people, possibly incited or led by a leader, makes a big commotion over an alleged crime in a mock trial where they play judge and jury (and sometimes executioner), essentially holding a [kangaroo court](#).

9] The 4-character long expression that Xiaobao uses here is “shi bu dai wo” (時不代我), which I haven’t been able to find when looking it up in Chinese dictionaries or the internet but based on the meaning that I can gather from it, it likely shares a meaning along the same lines as the English expression “time waits for no one” as the Chinese characters literally translate to “time not replace me.”

10] The 4-character idiom Xiaobao uses here is “bei tian min ren” (悲天憫人), which is typically used to describe when someone is being the equivalent of a “[bleeding heart](#).” Obviously, this is Xiaobao needling Juan-Juan on her naivete since he is more cynical than she is.

Chapter 16: Imp Or King Yama, Who's Hard To Deal With

Shiliu was also sent out to do things. After Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan woke up, they discovered that seated by the doorway there was actually another maid servant.

“I am really a bit impressed with your Mom [modern] of this lifetime for overseeing the manor's affairs, breastfeeding us milk as well as maintaining control over her children's surrounding situation at all times. If it were switched to that time period of ours, she would definitely also be a howling whirlwind¹ of a superwoman.”² Wang Juan said with a sigh.

“That is, you don't even look to see whose Mom she is? In the future, don't keep saying your Mom [modern], your Mom [modern] like that—it's like you're insulting people. Follow the local customs³ and say Dad or Mom. Who's that by the doorway again? Can't assign any more tasks, otherwise there won't be enough people to use in the household.”

Zhang Xiaobao looked at the maid servant keeping watch there as another idea emerged from his heart. He thought on it before finally overruling it. Seeing that Wang Juan was grumpily looking over here, he smiled as he said: “Too used to it, I keep on feeling like I'm still that person controlling large-scale organizations, ~ne.”

“Then, keep reminding yourself from time to time, especially when facing outsiders. Let's go. Go to the sand grounds. Let's use

the fast recovery rate of a child's body to quickly grab the time to train."

Once Wang Juan's voice fell, the two of them began to kick the mat down to the floor. This was the only way that the both of them could get down by themselves.

"Little Mister, you [honorific] are up?" Just after kicking down one mat, that maid servant vigilantly walked over.

"Don't need you. We'll go ourselves. You're called...?" Seeing the maid servant stretch out her hand to carry him and Wang Juan, Zhang Xiaobao spoke up to stop her.

"In reply to Little Mister's words, I'm called Xiaohong. Many thanks to Little Mister and Little Miss' intercession. From now on, I and Xiaoqi won't ever dare be loose-lipped again." The person calling herself Xiaohong was a bit cautious in her reply.

"Oh, you're Xiaohong. Work well at the manor; we won't mistreat you. Quickly, down." Wang Juan said a sentence to Xiaohong before pressing Zhang Xiaobao to roll down first.

Deeply inhaling a breath with both hands protecting the head, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan consecutively rolled on top of the mat on the floor under that flummoxed gaze of Xiaohong's. Xiaohong felt like the ones tumbling down there weren't two children but two great boulders that were tightly pressing down on her chest, frightening her until she didn't know what to do.

“Go to the kitchen hall to get the water we need. Once you mention it, they’ll understand. Go to the sandy grounds of the backcourt to find us. Remember to bring two or more changes of our clothing.”

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan ignored the mat on the floor. This kind of matter should be done by Xiaohong. One in front and one in back, they tottered while walking outside.

Gazing at that vanishing silhouette of Little Mister and the Wang Family’s Little Miss, Xiaohong blankly stood there. Only after a long while did she react as she used a hand to cover her mouth as she whispered: “Not monsters. I don’t know anything at all, won’t say anything at all.”

Trembling, Xiaohong went to the kitchen as ordered. The kitchen had already readied the items. As she carried the water while walking to the back, Xiaohong was still in the middle of a trance. As she walked and walked, she suddenly stopped mid-stride as she said to herself: “If Little Mister really is a monster, then wouldn’t the future patriarch be a monster? Doesn’t seem too bad, ~ah. With a monster as the patriarch, who would still dare to bully the manor’s people?”

In an instant, Xiaohong who had come around to the idea became happy. She sped up her footsteps to arrive at the sandy grounds in the back here, only to see Little Mister and the Wang Family’s Little Miss there, currently holding hands as they walked, ~ne. Nearby under a tree, Old Madam and Old Master were sitting, their faces filled with kind smiling expressions as they watched the two fellows over there mess around.

The proud sun slowly sinking in the west,⁴ Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan once again dragged their exhausted bodies back to their own room. Bearing with the aching soreness, they massaged each other once before lying down there to gradually fall asleep.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang had already given the orders these few days, requesting a pig elbow to eat every day—the kind without any salt. For her, for the sake of the children, it seemed that there wasn't anything she couldn't endure.

After being breastfed by Mrs. Zhang-Wang, by the time Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan flopped down there to read the Thousand Character Classic,⁵ Erniu and Yingtao had already returned while Shiliu was bringing several people to the market fair there to gather vegetable leaves, foul fish, and rotten shrimp.

“Little Mister, the sauce base⁶ has been prepped. Making sauce in this season isn't that good. My Mom has said that it can still be made—it'll be done after a couple days have passed. The money for the small ceramic jars that were commissioned will be sent over at the same time.” Only waiting until Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan raised their heads to rest their eyes did Erniu open his mouth to make the report.

“Unh, first work on this matter; you pay more attention to it. The items received through trade that aren't soybeans, keep a tenth for your family. Transport the rest back to the courtyard. Find a place to store it for me. The amount of every item, find a person who's literate to record it and give to me.

You also don't need to constantly come here every day. Come once every 2 or 3 days. When you encounter unresolvable matters, you can also come seek me out for advice. Rest in the courtyard house tonight. Return tomorrow morning."

Zhang Xiaobao deliberated slightly, after instructing Erniu, he then glanced Yingtao who was standing to the side. Nodding his little head, Yingtao came forward to say: "Little Mister, that kang [bed-stove] that you [honorific] spoke of has already been set and dried. Quite a few chicken eggs have also been purchased. I've been touching the chicken nests every day. I feel like I can do it."

"Properly prepared? This is good, then. Do it according to what I say. Around 20 days later, there will be chicks hatching. Wait for me to think on it. I'll describe the matter in detail for you to hear tomorrow. This stuff... I'm familiar.⁷ When you see Shiliu, have her be a bit quicker." Zhang Xiaobao was pensive for a moment before slowly speaking.

When Yingtao had also left, Wang Juan stared at Zhang Xiaobao before suddenly smiling: "Even thought you really knew of everything. So you were actually insecure. You familiar with it? Why were you so unconfident when speaking of it?"

"Can't say I'm unfamiliar. Yingtao had already grasped the temperature so what she needs is for me to give her confidence. Being in power isn't easy, ~ah." Zhang Xiaobao smacked his lips, continuing to read after he finished speaking. This wasn't simply reading but also memorizing.

Wang Juan didn't say anything more at the moment as her eyes looked straight at the characters with too many brush strokes.⁸ Only after a while did she speak: "Actually, living isn't that easy. Who even knows what tomorrow will be like? Natural catastrophes, man-made disasters—if they can't be avoided, then confront them. What do you want to use that stuff for?"

Wang Juan's tendency for mental leaps was a bit stronger—she had been lamenting previously and then, with a switch in topic, had gone elsewhere.

"Rewards. From now on, the money made will be even greater and be subject to the suspicions of other people. I may not have the inclination to oversee the internal affairs. Right now, consolidating the hearts of the people is needed. My request is that the two manors of the Zhang and Wang families must be like a monolithic iron block. It's good that there are people to help out." Zhang Xiaobao said as he flipped a page.

Wang Juan flipped it back as she hadn't finished reading it, ~ne: "Still short two lines—not used to reading the vertical version.⁹ Who did you say was helping?"

"Song Jing-gong, that swindler. We can get a sum of money from him. Read quickly. Read a page and then, sleep." Zhang Xiaobao yawned as he spoke.

It was another brilliantly sunny day and the early morning breeze still carried a bit of coolness; the chirping of the birds were like the sunlight passing through the gaps in the foliage as their

presence could be sensed only inadvertently. The little kids and idle adults with nothing to do were all at home flipping over the firewood piles as they dug out the decayed stuff from underneath to carefully heap it up to the side as they awaited the arrival of the people from the manor to trade for it.

Song Jing-gong didn't return yesterday and had randomly found a household of the manor to request lodging with. Ordinarily, with a philanthropist like him staying for a few nights, the people of the house should have included the food to be taken care of by them without asking for even 1 wen [cash]. But who knew that the people of these two neighboring manors actually wanted money out of him.

One night's stay was 5 wen [cash]; a single meal was 5 wen [cash] and it was even without meat while with meat, it was 10 wen [cash]. Just that single crummy dish—not mentioning the flavor not being so good, there wasn't that much grease,¹⁰ either. Going to the town tavern to stay, 15 wen [cash] was enough and you could even drink a bowl of wine, ~ne.

When he left that household, Song Jing-gong even secretly swore a curse. All the money on his person had been given to that Zhang Family's little kid but they had gone so far as to take an ink stone¹¹ from the Four Treasures of the Study¹² that he always carried on him. That ink stone had been priced at 50 wen [cash] and it had only been worth a broken down bed for a night's stay, a bowl of brown rice,¹³ and a plate of eggs with stir-fried garlic chives¹⁴ that they had actually counted as a meat dish.

With such a dismal mood, even the weather being this nice couldn't make Song Jing-gong cheer up. If that jade and silver hadn't been taken by another person, Song Jing-gong was really prepared to leave here. Now that the stuff had been given away, if he didn't swindle any profit, whatever else was said, he couldn't accept it.

Imagining the spectacle of when the Zhang Manor's people would be swindled to tears, Song Jing-gong's heart was finally a bit comforted. He hurried along the way, only slowing down his footsteps after he had nearly reached the manor's largest courtyard. Tidying his clothes, he said in the direction of the great door: "I wonder if the one managing the affairs of the manor is present? Song Jing-gong has come to pay a visit."

The people at the doorway here had already received instructions so they glanced at the door and were silent.

Song Jing-gong waited for a while before reaching out to knock on the door. Only then did someone inside pull open the small portal, sticking their head out to look at Song Jing-gong as they said: "What?"

"I am Song Jing-gong, desiring to meet the person managing the affairs of your house." Song Jing-gong cleared his throat, speaking in a clear voice.

"Don't recognize you, have a name card?¹⁵ How could the person managing the affairs of my house be so easily seen?" The gatekeeper curled his lip in disdain.

“I came here before yesterday along with your house’s Little Mister. Why is this not known today?” Song Jing-gong was inwardly furious yet he couldn’t directly demonstrate it and could only continue talking.

“I only saw Little Mister yesterday and saw no other people. Eiyou~!¹⁶ Isn’t this Mister Zheng?¹⁷ You [honorific] have come; please quickly enter. This little one here will go inform them for you.” The gatekeeper was speaking when his face suddenly changed in expression, greeting Song Jing-gong afterward before turning around to run inside.

Song Jing-gong hearing this mention by the gatekeeper, turned his head to observe only to see a young person around 20 years of age with a face full of smiles who was currently standing there, his upper torso clad in a little jacket and lower parts in tight-legged trousers. He didn’t appear to be a person with money so why did that gatekeeper treat him like this?

Holding onto his suspicions, Song Jing-gong made an obeisance¹⁷ to this person as he said: “So it is Mister Zheng. This one below¹⁸ is acquainted;¹⁹ this one below is surnamed Song.”

“Oh, oh, greetings, Mister Song. Don’t know if Mister Song is like this one²⁰ coming here to borrow money?” This Mister Zheng didn’t seem to know what secrecy was, revealing his purpose in coming upon opening his mouth.

“Borrow money? Then, I wonder why the gatekeeper gives the two of us such different treatment?” Song Jing-gong wanted to figure it out where he was lacking.

“Oh, Mister Song must be an upright person. Although I am borrowing money but every time I come here, I always...”

“Mister Zheng, you [honorific], please come inside.” Just as Song Jing-gong wanted to know the reason, the gatekeeper returned, standing by the doorway in welcome. Mister Zheng smiled as he said thanks, offhandedly handing over a string that was enough to be 300 wen [cash] in copper coins to the gatekeeper before walking inside with the gatekeeper in respectful attendance.

Gazing at Mister Zheng’s silhouette in the distance, the gatekeeper weighed the money in his hands with a face full of smiles before happily stowing it away. When he was looking back at Song Jing-gong again, he suddenly gave a cold humph and not speaking at all, he turned around to go inside.

Song Jing-gong at once knew the reason. Gritting his teeth, he turned around to leave. This wasn’t because he didn’t want to swindle anymore but it was to go back to get money. He finally understood what was going on with this gatekeeper. This really was called King Yama²¹ is easy to see; an imp²² is hard to deal with.²³

Notes:

¹ “Chi zha feng yun” (叱咤風雲) is an idiom with Cantonese

origins. When taken apart etymologically, chizha/叱咤 means “to roar/bellow” and fengyun/風雲 means “wind (and) cloud,” which tends to call up the image of a storm or turbulence. This phrase is generally used to describe something omnipotent or all-powerful using the weather/nature as an image. Because it was a bit hard for me to translate this literally as well as get the gist of it across as briefly as possible, I compromised by choosing a similar metaphor that hopefully also conveyed a roughly equivalent meaning.

2] “Nu Qiang Ren” ([女強人](#)) is another slang term with Cantonese origins that was probably popularized and adopted into the Mandarin vernacular through a Hong Kong drama called “Jia Bian” (家變) whose official English title is “[A House Is Not a Home.](#)” Cantonese slang or idioms being re-purposed and re-adapted into Mandarin Chinese is understandable when you consider that Hong Kong was the main source of Chinese entertainment for years until the mainland Chinese economy kicked into high enough gear to allow its film/TV industries to mature and why Hong Kong-based celebrities still have name recognition in mainland China, even today. Qiangren/強人, meaning “strong person,” was a term first coined in the [Water Margin](#) (水滸傳) to describe someone highly skilled but it also later gained the added meaning of bandit or robber, which sounds similar since they are qiangdao/強盜 or qiangfei/搶匪 in Chinese. “Nu Qiang Ren” (女強人) likely harkens back to the initial “talented person” definition but adds the character for woman (nu/女) in front of it. A similar term in Chinese would be “tie niang zi” (鐵娘子) or “iron lady.” Both terms would be applied to career women who balance work and home lives while excelling at both. Because of these considerations and for the sake of reader understanding while simultaneously keeping the grammatically smooth, I have translated this term as superwoman.

3] “Ru xiang sui su” (入鄉隨俗) literally translates to “entering village, follow customs.” An equivalent saying in English, which is attributed to [Ambrose](#), would be “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” that is so often simply quoted as the shortened “when in Rome” to the point that people hardly remember the full expression. Here, Xiaobao is chiding Juan-Juan for still using the modern version of “your mother” to refer to Mrs. Zhang-Wang, which really sounds like she’s cursing him out. It is especially glaring since by contrast, Xiaobao has mostly switched to using the ancient term for mother. So he is telling her to switch over as well.

4] I don’t think I did this phrase justice as the original Chinese is written rather poetically although I can’t find what classical source the author might be quoting or referencing: “jiao yang jian jian xi chen” (驕陽漸漸西沉). It could also be a turn of phrase the author made up on his own since he is rather literary. If anyone knows for sure, let me know!

5] The [Thousand Character Classic](#) or “Qian Zi Wen” (千字文) is the equivalent of a primer for ancient Chinese children just like how little kids would get taught their ABCs as a basis for how to read and write in English (or any other Romance language that uses the Latin alphabet for that matter). It is written as a poem, which serves as a mnemonic device, similar to how singing the alphabet song helps American kids remember the letters.

6] A “pizi” (坯子) is the base for the sauce that is usually created by mixing the raw materials and is then processed through fermentation, marination, or brewing depending on the needs of the recipe for the specific sauce.

7] The shu/熟 used in this sentence can also mean hot or warm since being familiar with something in Chinese literally means to be hot/warm with it, adding a bit of wordplay in this conversation since they are talking about controlling the temperature by being familiar with it.

8] This is another reference to the fact that Xiaobao and Juan-Juan are looking at [Traditional Chinese characters](#), which would use more brush strokes than they are used to, having grown up using the [Simplified Chinese character](#) set.

9] Wang Juan is referring to the fact that not only is [Chinese a written language](#) whose characters were traditionally [oriented horizontally from right-to-left, it could also be written vertically](#). The influence of European languages such as English and the predominantly Latin-based encoding of computer fonts means that modern Chinese is now generally written horizontally from left-to-right with a decrease in the use of vertically written Chinese. So reading a Tang dynasty book would require some adjustment from Juan-Juan since the text would not only be using more complex characters (in her view, at least), it is also oriented in the opposite direction of what she's used to, and probably oriented vertically as well.

10] Meat was considered a luxury in the ancient Chinese diet. So the oils, fats, and grease associated with meat consumption was correspondingly very highly valued to the point that “you shui” ([油水](#)), which is grease or “oil water,” became a synonym for profit in Chinese and oily or greasy merchants were a common epithet to illustrate how rich they were.

[11\]](#) A “yan tai” (硯台) or [ink stone](#) is a mortar that serves as the surface that the [ink stick](#) is ground against as well as being the container that the ink is mixed and stored in during use. An ink stone could be made out of different kinds of material as well as decorated or carved to beautiful effect with some of them being sought after for their historical and artistic qualities as well as utilitarian function.

[12\]](#) [The Four Treasures of the Study](#) or “wen fang si bao” (文房四寶) are the [brush ink \(stick\)](#), [paper](#), and [ink stone](#). They were considered necessities for a scholar to have in their study and carrying them around on their travels in case inspiration struck them was also a common habit. Needless to say, selecting the right ones was itself an art form and a matter of subjective opinion that the ancient literati took seriously.

[13\]](#) [Brown rice](#) is rice with only the husk removed, which is why it’s called “rough rice” (cao mi/糙米) in Chinese.

[14\]](#) I have translated “jiu cai” ([韭菜](#)) as garlic chives though it is also known by a plethora of different names in English that include Chinese leek, oriental garlic, etc. Its scientific name is [Allium tuberosum](#) and it was widely cultivated in East Asia for its culinary, medicinal, and decorative purposes.

[15\]](#) I have translated “ming tie” ([名帖](#)) literally as “name card” though it is essentially the ancient Chinese equivalent of a calling or [visiting card](#). The reason I have done so is because I wanted to emphasize the name part as they were handwritten and served as an impromptu way to prove the holder’s identity while showing off their calligraphy. Obviously, these cards were more effective

the more famous the card owner was. A card bearing the name of the person was given to the household they wished to call upon as a form of etiquette. These cards were considered the person's "face" and could also function as a form of letter of introduction if given to a friend or acquaintance that could be used to gain entry to a household outside of their social circle or request a meeting with someone who was also a friend or acquaintance of the name card's owner. Since these helped facilitate social calls, they were a necessary tool for the Chinese aristocracy and literati in maintaining their social networks, similar to their European counterparts.

[16\]](#) “Eiyou” (誒呦) is another onomatopoeia in Chinese that is an exclamation of surprise.

[17\]](#) The gesture of greeting Song Jing-gong is making here, “gong shou” (拱手), is a hand gesture similar in concept to a [Namaste](#) but with one hand clenched in a fist instead of the palms meeting. This was a polite way to greet people as it maintained a safe distance between the greeter and the one being greeted without touching as well as conveying polite friendliness. So it is a bit like a handshake geared for wary [hypochondriacs](#) or those with [a phobia to touch](#). You've probably seen this gesture before if you have ever watched any Chinese fantasy media as it shows up a lot in kung fu films, wuxia series, and any other visual media that are set in ancient China or an analogue of it. For pictures on what it looks like, you can visit this page [here](#).

[18\]](#) Song Jing-gong is using humble speech to refer to himself in the third person here. “Zai xia” (在下) literally means “is under” and is a polite way for the speaker to imply that they are beneath the listener as a sign of polite humility. Since Song Jing-gong

wants information from the other person, the power dynamic between them is unequal and his polite humility is warranted.

[19\]](#) The Chinese used here of “you li” (有理) literally means “have rationality.” Since this is one of those pleasantries said by rote upon meeting someone, I translated for the gist rather than the literal meaning.

[20\]](#) Mister Zheng is referring to himself with just mo/某, which would be similar to someone using “one” to refer to themselves (ex: One wishes one could take a vacation).

[21\]](#) “Yan Wang” (閻王) is the Chinese name for [King Yama](#), who is the King of Hell in Buddhism. The Chinese name is based off the original Sanskrit name, Yama Raja (यम राज). He is known as Enma Ou in Japan so some translations will use this name or a variation on it for him. He is a figure that plays a similar role to [Osiris](#) or [Hades](#) in that he impartially judges the souls of the dead that come before him and decides their destination.

[22\]](#) “Xiao gui” (小鬼) literally translates to “little ghost.” However, because it is being mentioned in text to contrast with [King Yama](#) who is the king of the underworld and has a lot of demons and spirits as his subordinates, I chose to translate it as imp. Kids can also be jokingly referred to as “xiaogui” (小鬼) when they are naughty or precocious, further supporting its connotations as imp.

[23\]](#) This 8-character couplet, “Yan Wang hao jian, xiao gui nan chan” (閻王好見, 小鬼難纏), is essentially a Chinese aphorism that states that individuals of high status like King Yama (who is known for his fairness, by the way) can be easier to meet or deal with than

is expected while small-time peons like the imps subordinate to [King Yama](#) (who are prone to bribery or caprice) can be harder to deal with by contrast and their difficulty in being dealt with seems to be an inverse reflection of the pettiness or greatness of their positions.

Chapter 17: White Clouds Meeting & Parting

Words Make A Fortune

Song Jing-gong was a swindler. He had always thought of himself as the most impressive and simply didn't think on other matters, not even knowing to frequently communicate and exchange ideas with his peers. So he really could be said to be at a self-involved standstill.¹

Zhang Xiaobao had seized advantage of this psychology of his to endlessly swindle money. Every time was a little bit and he even utilized the gatekeeper.

The morning after returning, the more Song Jing-gong thought about it, the madder he got. For the sake of taking revenge earlier, he brought along the money to rush back here the same night. The one he encountered was still that gatekeeper and with the experience from this morning, this time without waiting to speak, he had already handed over a piece of silver.

It weighed around half a [tael](#), more than double what Mister Zheng had given in the morning. Sure enough, the gatekeeper greeted him with smiles, taking the money and almost flying, ran inside. Not long after, he came back, revealing a helpless expression.

He said: "Mister Song, the steward is currently checking the accounts. He probably has no way of meeting with Mister today. Perhaps coming early in the day tomorrow would be better."

“Then, is the Mistress of your house present?” Song Jing-gong had spent half a silver [tael](#). His heart was hurting, ne. That much money, ah, was just given to the gatekeeper.

Seeing that there was no way to speak to the steward at this time, he presented a new request.

Who knew that upon hearing these words, the gatekeeper who had been dealing him with a smiling face just now, his expression darkened immediately as he coldly said: “The Mistress of my house has no need for Mister’s concern. Please leave, Mister.”

Song Jing-gong froze as he suddenly realized that there were two kids to feed. At this time, she must have been breastfeeding the kids, ~ne. His asking after her like this was really too discourteous. His face embarrassed, he didn’t dare converse too much as he forced a smile and turned around to slowly take his leave.

After walking tens of steps, he discovered that he was currently walking towards that family that he had requested lodging with yesterday. Thinking of that family’s meals, he switched directions, moving towards the Wang Manor there. Who knew that though he had found a household whose appearances looked clean but after speaking of his intent, they had actually wanted 10 wen [[cash](#)] in lodging money and the food expenses were likewise doubled.

Thinking that this family’s food should be a bit better, he gritted his teeth and accepted it. After all, in coming here to Zhang Manor to swindle, it wasn’t good to go to Ge Manor. Who knew that dinner upon its delivery was actually a dish of chicken eggs and stir-fried garlic chives? And it didn’t even compare to those

chicken eggs with stir-fried garlic chives, ~ne. At least that dish had more chicken eggs.

Lying down on that bed whose boards were nearly gnawed hollow, underneath the thin layer of matting was a carpet of thatch straw² that pierced him uncomfortably. Just this was bad enough but within the room, there were actually even mosquitoes flying about.

For yesterday night's sleep, that family's people had even lit a piece of rope woven from Chinese mugwort³ to use as mosquito repellent, ~ne. Today had nothing whatsoever; this room was even adjacent to the back of that courtyard.

Through the broken half of the window shutter with the illumination of the moonlight, things that were loudly flapping their wings could be seen as they wandered around inside. Song Jing-gong didn't even dare take off his clothes. Using the blanket that had an odor he couldn't identify to cover his face with, he was completely unable to fall asleep.

Outside the window, the crickets' sounds were never-ending. In the past, listening to them was another type of flavor; today, it was even more of a kind of flavor.

The late night dew was heavy as the vegetables and the fruit trees planted within the courtyard endlessly sent damp air into the room. Song Jing-gong felt that his hands and feet were icy cold. Tossing and turning, he curled his body up into a ball but still had no way of stopping this type of chilliness.

“Old Father,⁴ Old Father, open the door. Let’s discuss something.”

Song Jing-gong who was finally unable to endure this kind of torture rose to arrive in front of a room next door, gently knocking on the door and speaking up only after hearing a querying response from within.

“What—why aren’t you sleeping when it’s this late?” Opening the door was a 50-something year old person who yawned as he discontentedly asked.

“Old Father, that room of mine is really too cold. I wonder if there is a thin quilt that can be lent for my use?” Song Jing-gong didn’t expect that a peasant could actually dare to speak in such a way to him and sighed desolately in his heart while speaking in a conciliatory manner.

“What bedding is there? It’s all been put away. Where would I go with you in the middle of the night to find it? Put up with it for a night. What were you thinking earlier before?” The old father rejected him.

“There really isn’t?”

“It’s not like there isn’t—there is a new bed quilt that’s been given to my grandson to use for wedding a wife. It was put in a conspicuous spot; spent an entire 1 silver [tael](#) to have people make

it.” The old father spoke while sighing over the master-family’s formidability—they had calculated even this.

“I’ll buy it. A silver [tael](#)—I’ll buy it.” Song Jing-gong’s eyes were all red. What quilt was 1 silver [tael](#)? Could it be satin?

“It’s still a bothersome effort to go get it.” The old father griped while not moving.

“I’ll add another 10 wen [[cash](#)].” Song Jing-gong raised the fee.

“Wait here.” The old father humphed once and closed the door, probably going inside to find the quilt.

Only after an entire quarter-hour⁵ did he saunter out and stuff a bundled up item into Song Jing-gong’s arms before turning around to close the door and put up the crossbar.

Song Jing-gong hugged the quilt, feeling a bit warmer. Returning to his own room, he spread the quilt to lay on top of his body but he still couldn’t sleep so he could only look around in all four directions using the moonlight.

As he looked around, he saw the quilt. The more he looked, the more that he felt like something was a bit wrong. He didn’t know if it was the moonlight that was originally such a pure white or if it was an issue with the quilt’s color. When he peered closely at it to see, it was made out of coarse thread. With this one set, 30 wen [[cash](#)] would be considered too much; the most expensive couldn’t

be more than 50 wen [[cash](#)] but he had actually spent 1 silver [tael](#).

This was bad enough but seeing that those dyed areas had obviously been starched and washed till they had lost their color and were splotched off-white—this was called a new quilt?

Song Jing-gong was this mad, ~ah. After thinking on it, he simply didn't sleep and directly stood up to walk in front of the window as he pushed open the other window shutter to look at the night view with the quilt draped over him.

Several days passed like this. Song Jing-gong had spent quite a bit of money. Excluding what he had given to Zhang Xiaobao, it was enough to be 10 silver [taels](#) added up all together, including lodgings, food and drink, as well as gifts yet he had only met Steward Zhang once. He did speak of the matter but had only said that it was a partnership for a profitable business.

But Steward Zhang said he wasn't able to make the decision and needed to report to his Mistress for her to know.

Who knew that this wait would be another several days? If he hadn't spent so much money, he'd have already gone back—who'd freely loiter here? But the money had been spent yet the business hadn't been completed. He wasn't satisfied, ~ah. Today, he finally decided to go to Ge Manor to stay and not spend that wrongful money.

“Xiaobao, we’ve arrived here for 20 days?” On one end of a seesaw under the shade of a tree was Wang Juan, who asked this as she vigorously pressed down to get Zhang Xiaobao on that side raised up.

Zhang Xiaobao shifted his center of gravity to have Wang Juan lift him up as he answered: “No, just 19 days. After another 10 or so days, the chicks should come out. The earthworms haven’t grown up yet so put them in the bathrooms of the peasant houses. Oh, they’re called outhouses.⁶ If they eat maggots, it doesn’t matter if they’re buried but I’m afraid that they’ll fall into the cesspool and die from drowning—they’ll need to be fed a bit of food grain.”

“The sauce, ~ne. It’s almost done?”

“Still early, ~ne. Still needs 20 some days to be done.” Zhang Xiaobao estimated the days that Erniu stated.

“Are you sure there’ll be people to buy it? It’s no more than a bit of spiciness with meat inside.” Wang Juan also energetically moved back to lift Zhang Xiaobao back up again as they used this to exercise the strength of their legs and hips, playing while they were training.

“Definitely not a problem. Wait until the sauce comes out, we’ll include the methods for dishes made using the sauce to be sent together to those inns and restaurants as well as shops. If they sell well, then they’ll come buy the sauce. Let’s rest. It’s been 2 hours. My legs have been rubbed raw.

In a while, let's have Xiaohong go to the back kitchen and tell them to make some kelp and bone soup—wasn't some kelp bought 2 days ago? Supplement the diet a bit; just drinking milk won't do either, ~ah."

Zhang Xiaobao got down from this end of the seesaw to walk outside where there was sunlight to bask in the sun.

Wang Juan also followed by going there. On that side, Xiaohong hurried over to the kitchen to order people to make stuff, rushed back to take out a small couch to place it in the center of the courtyard, and raised an umbrella. She herself took cover underneath the shade as she watched over the two little ancestors while pondering her own concerns.

Usually, when she had free time, she would make clothes for herself and for Xiaoqi. This time, whatever else said, she didn't dare to. If she let people catch her holding needle and thread while caring for the children, then nobody could help her at all.

"Xiaobao, don't keep lying down. See how much money we have." Wang Juan flipped over, resting her chin on the couch as she asked.

"There isn't too much money; accumulated a bit of stuff, though. Let's wait. Waiting till the fall harvest will be good."

"What do you want to do for the fall harvest? Keep feeling like you're up to no good." Up to this moment, Wang Juan still didn't

know what calculations Zhang Xiaobao was making.⁷

“How to say, ~ne. If you say up to no good is fine, saying it’s working with good intentions⁸ would also do—it just depends on which angle you approach this from.”

“Like?” Wang Juan prompted.

“Like trade merchants making money, is that good or bad, ~ne? If they want profit, they can only buy low to sell high.” Zhang Xiaobao pensively said.

When Wang Juan, who had been lying there, heard these words, she sat up in a flash as she stared at Zhang Xiaobao and said: “You want to buy food grains? You want to hoard to corner the market?”⁹

“Don’t be silly. How much money can I have—and to hoard, too? I’m thinking of buying up food grains locally. Today was a rich harvest here so food grain is cheap; next year, transport it somewhere else to sell and make a great sum.” Zhang Xiaobao finally spoke his objective out loud.

“What place?”

“First, can’t say it. If it’s spoken of with another person, then a secret is no longer secret.” Zhang Xiaobao refused once again.

“I won’t ask at all from now on. You think on that Swindler Song and how he’ll need to be swindled.”

“I’m not a divine sage and not even a monster, either. Let’s wait. Have Steward Zhang get in contact tomorrow; if the soldiers come, the general will deal with it.”[10](#)

The next day, Song Jing-gong came to the courthouse here as expected. Coming once every day, it had already become a habit. He originally assumed that he wouldn’t have any results today but who knew that the gatekeeper would take the money he gave to go inside for the notification and that Steward Zhang himself had actually come out in welcome.

“He-he, Mister Song in coming here must have waited for a long time? Quickly, follow me inside.” Steward Zhang enthusiastically led Song Jing-gong into the parlor room, making Song Jing-gong feel a bit unaccustomed.

When the two people had sat down, the servants delivered the tea water that had finished brewing. After drinking a few sips, Steward Zhang opened his mouth to say: “For Mister Song to come here for this many days, it must certainly be an important matter? Today, Mistress is out on business and will require several days to return. All of the affairs within the manor have all been handed to this Zhang to manage. If Mister Song has something to say, please do.”

Upon hearing these words from Steward Zhang, Song Jing-gong

was tempted within his heart and tentatively asked: “Decisions on financial matters can also be made?”

“Of course. My family has been the Steward of the Zhang family for generations; the paltry matter of allocating funds is naturally not impossible.” Steward Zhang replied with a bit of loftiness.

“Oh, if this is as you said, then Steward Zhang is greatly esteemed in this Zhang Manor. Congratulations, Steward Zhang.” Song Jing-gong flattered.

“Well said, well said. Mister Song might as well speak of the matter that you’ve come for.” Steward Zhang squinted his eyes, appearing to have enjoyed being praised.

“That’s well. This Song will speak here, then. I have a store in that Sanshui County¹¹ that specializes in antiques and art.”¹² Song Jing-gong softly said.

“Oh? Could it be to have me go buy some calligraphy and paintings? ” Steward Zhang asked.

“Not so, it is to discuss another important matter—the matter of making a fortune.” Song Jing-gong finally spoke out loud words that he considered to be full of temptation.

Notes:

¹¹ “Gu bu zi feng” (固步自封) is a 4-character couplet that literally

translates to “solid step self seal” and is used to describe someone who doesn’t improve and has closed themselves off from the world. A roughly equivalent English expression would be “[resting on one’s laurels](#)” where a person decides to rely on their existing reputation or fame but doesn’t bother improving further, running the risk of their rivals or enemies overtaking them in the future.

2] I have literally translated the name for “[mao cao](#)” (茅草), whose scientific name is [Imperata cylindrica](#). Because it is a grass native to wide swathes of the world including Asia, Africa, and Oceania, it has several other names associated with it. However, in Chinese, its name is mostly derived from its function, which is its use in [thatching](#) the roofs of buildings. It can also be used medicinally and in other handicrafts.

3] “[Ai hao](#)” (艾蒿) is a plant most well known for its use in [traditional Chinese medicine](#). It can also be referred to as ai cao/艾草 (ai grass) or aiye/艾葉 (ai leaf) but its scientific name is [Artemisia argyi](#). It has many effects proscribed to it with many applications in different areas.

4] I’ve translated “lao zhang” (老丈) as “old father” because it is a respectful way to address an older man and zhang/丈 also comes up as part of the formal term of address for a father-in-law, “yue zhang” (岳丈).

5] Time in ancient China could be divided [decimally](#) with the [traditional time units](#) for divisions of the day being [shichen](#)/時辰 (2 hours), fen/分 (minute), miao/秒 or hao/毫 (second). The exact amount of the [time unit of ke](#)/刻 varied wildly over history but since it had been roughly around 15 minutes before finally being

modernized to equal exactly 15 minutes, I have opted to translate ke/刻 as a quarter-hour.

6] “Mao fang” (茅房) are the ancient Chinese equivalents of latrines or outhouses as they were pits dug into the ground with thatched straw roofs. Obviously, they were an outdoor building separated from the residential areas. Needless to say, they’re a rare sight in China nowadays.

7] The text used here is “da de she me suan pan” (打的什麼盤算), which literally means “hitting what [suanpan/abacus](#).” Complex math calculations were done using the [suanpan](#) (算盤) in ancient China, the Chinese abacus. Because the character for plan or scheme (ji/計) also has heavy connotations with making calculations, the act of using an [abacus](#) (da suan pan/打盤算) would be a natural metaphor for the Chinese to use in describing someone scheming or making plans for their own benefit.

8] There is a bit of wordplay here as Xiaobao springboards off of Juan-Juan’s choice of phrasing to use two 4-character couplets that both contain “hao xin” (好心), which means “good heart.” I’ve translated “mei an hao xin” (沒安好心) as “up to no good” while “hao xin ban shi” (好心辦事) has been translated as “working with good intentions.” Hopefully, this bit of wordplay is apparent in the English translation.

9] “Tun ji ju qi” (囤積居奇) is a Chinese idiom that describes stocking up on goods in vast quantities while the price is low with the intent of waiting for or creating a future situation where its price will skyrocket due to rarity in order to sell it for an exponential amount of profit. Because China historically has had a

lot of plagues and famines that caused food shortages and a corresponding rise in prices, this expression is politically sensitive in connotation since most often or not, Chinese merchants would profit greatly from the misery of the populace using the unstable food supply as a basis for their fortune. Hence, the bad reputation merchants kept getting in ancient China.

[10\]](#) This is actually the first half of a 8 character long sentence in Chinese: “Bing lai jiang dang, shui lai tu yan” ([兵來將擋](#), [水來土掩](#)), which illustrates adapting one’s reaction according to the needs of the moment or the current threat. Translated, this idiom means: “if soldiers come, the general will block it; if the waters come, the earth will cover it.” However, like with these phrases, the first 4-character couplet (Bing lai jiang dang/兵來將擋) is quoted more frequently and tends to act as a mnemonic device for the entire quote. A roughly equivalent English expression would be, “What will come will come and we will meet it when it does,” which can be similarly abbreviated into “What will come will come.”

[11\]](#) Because I’ve decided to use pinyin for the names of locations in order to match up with the names of real-life historical places when they are mentioned, 三水縣 will be transcribed as “Sanshui County” from now on. Sanshui/三水 simply means “Three Waters.”

[12\]](#) The phrase used here is “gu wan zi hua” (古玩字畫), which translates to “antiques, calligraphy and paintings.” Since zihua/字畫 was usually considered collectible art, that is the reason for my translation choice here.

Chapter 18: Striking Like A Thunderclap

After saying these words, Song Jing-gong didn't make another sound as he lowered his head to drink the tea there.

Steward Zhang inwardly saying, 'Indeed, it has come,' also feigned drinking a few sips of tea and waited until more water was refilled before he asked: "Don't know the matter of making a fortune that Mister Song spoke of, what it is in detail?"

"This... Ai~! So be it. I'll speak of it for Steward Zhang to hear. This Song heard people say that those barbarian¹ lands has a kind of strange item and thought that if it were transported to our Great Tang, it certainly could be sold for a high price. So I first gave a bit of a down payment for around 1,000 dan [stone]² with each dan [stone] at 200 wen [cash]. That object appears to be bright red, mouthwateringly tender and beautiful³ with green leaves on top that is brilliant and rich in color.⁴

It was originally said to be 1,000 dan [stone] but who would have thought that being transported over here would be 2,000 dan [stone]? The financial wealth on hand that this Song has isn't enough; therefore, came here to find Steward to discuss whether or not to make a fortune along with this Song and purchase these 1,000 dan [stone] in goods?" Song Jing-gong said with a face full of assurance.

"Don't know what item is actually so precious? This 1,000 dan [stone], if eating it up, would need 200 silver taels, ~ah. It really isn't a small sum and to not have even seen the item. This..."

Steward Zhang revealed a pained expression. In fact, he wasn't a bit afraid. No matter what was said now, it wouldn't be finalized so he could only follow up with talk.

“Yes, ~ya, 200 silver taels, it's not good for Steward to decide. Why not wait for your noble manor's Mistress to return before having a discussion?” Song Jing-gong goaded.

Steward Zhang really did reveal an unhappy facial expression as he lightly placed the tea bowl onto the table and said: “200 taels might be a lot but it's not that this Zhang can't make the decision. It's only that having not seen what item it is, it's not good to just take it out. If it's convenient for Mister Song, then please present the physical object for a look to let this Zhang be reassured.”

“Steward Zhang needn't worry about that item, either. This Song still has a method here that could solve this Song's trouble and it can also let Steward Zhang gain some benefit, too.” Song Jing-gong seeing Steward Zhang speak like this, smiled as he spoke.

“Oh? There's another way? Quickly, Mister Song, please speak of it. If it's feasible, 200 silver taels can still be brought out.” Steward Zhang played along.

Song Jing-gong with no hurry or delay took out several sheets of paper from his person to gently unfold in front of Steward Zhang, motioning for Steward Zhang to see.

Steward Zhang carefully picked up these sheets of paper, turning

one page after another. After a long while, he revealed his incomprehension: “This is a store deed; I wonder for what purpose Mister Song brought this out for?”

“Correct, it is a store deed. It is the store deed of that antiques and art store in Sanshui of this Song’s. The entirety of the goods inside added to the property there is valued at 300 taels of white silver. Here is a document as proof from the broker⁵ that gives even more detail; every item each have their values indicated.

If Steward Zhang could take out 200 silver taels to lend to this Song, this Song is willing to use this store as well as the goods inside as a mortgage. Wait until this Song has received the goods, I will immediately return the money. Let’s calculate it based on 3% interest. By that time, that share of the benefits for Steward Zhang naturally won’t be less.”

Song Jing-gong explained all of his intentions. No matter from which side, it made people feel that it wasn’t bad.

“So that’s to say if the principal and interest hasn’t been repaid, that store including the goods within will belong to us?” Steward Zhang asked again.

“That’s right.” Song Jing-gong nodded in confirmation.

“Then, don’t know why Mister Song doesn’t seek other people to borrow from? There are specialized places dedicated to these matters of loaning money and also I wonder when those goods will arrive?” Steward Zhang asked in puzzlement and with some

disbelief.

As if Song Jing-gong had already known Steward Zhang would have such a question, he smiled as he replied: “That barbarian trader’s sole goal is profit; this Song is afraid that in seeking someplace else to borrow money, they will not only not lend to me but instead independently seek out the barbarian trader. At that time, this Song will not be able to get even 1 dan [stone] of cargo.

Having heard that Zhang Manor’s people are all those belonging to the ilk with a kind and honest heart, thus did I arrive at your noble manor for consultation. My thinking was that even if your noble manor doesn’t lend me the money and partner with me, you still wouldn’t do that sort of dishonest business like pulling the kindling out from under the cauldron.⁶

As for those goods, their arrival time nears; estimating it wouldn’t take more than half a month, thus this Song’s inner heart was full of anxiety.”

When he said these words, Song Jing-gong himself felt that it was contrary to his heart. Staying here these several days, he had been cheated quite a bit. It was like this so if they were still kind and honest, then this world didn’t have any good people. Recalling that worn quilt, his resentment burned.

“Well said, well said. These two points Mister Song raised, this Zhang feels are feasible. How about this, wait until this Zhang thoroughly makes some calculations, then I will elaborate with Mister Song. If it’s like how Mister Song put it, regardless of success or failure, I won’t go and do that damaging thing. Attend

here, ~ah, order the kitchen to make a seat's share and to serve Mister Song well.

Mister Song, please abide in this hall for a moment. This Zhang is a person short on calculation.⁷ Wait for me to return and discuss it a bit with my father, is that fine? ” Steward Zhang asked after making the arrangements.

“All right, then I'll have to trouble Steward Zhang to take care of it. Regardless of whether this matter succeeds or not, this Song will remember Steward's one favor. If it really succeeds, wait until the day this Song makes money as I'll definitely compensate Steward Zhang thoroughly.”

Song Jing-gong was inwardly happy. If Steward Zhang hadn't spoken this way and had immediately promised it with pleasure, then he'd be worrying, ~ne.

Steward Zhang didn't continue speaking. After saying a word to wait, he hurriedly left the parlor room, rushing straight to where Zhang Xiaobao was. As for his father there, he had no relation to this matter at all so going there would be of no use anyway.

At this time, Zhang Xiaobao was currently with Wang Juan rolling around in the sand, ~ne. A couple days ago, they'd had people make a ball out of pig bladder⁸ with leather pasted on the outside. The two of them kicked it back and forth, using this to exercise their bodies, which could even train their physical coordination.

Seeing Steward Zhang rush over, they stopped and asked: “Steward Zhang knows what that Swindler Song wants to do?”

Steward Zhang repeated the conversation he just had with Song Jing-gong, intact and unedited, to Little Mister once again and then didn't make another sound as he quietly awaited Little Mister's orders. At this time, Little Mister's measure in his heart was not low; the things that Erniu's family was doing, Mrs. Zhang-Wang did not conceal from him.

While he was touched by that kind of trust from Mistress, he was also astonished by Little Mister's methods. As for whatever claims of divine sages and monsters, he fundamentally didn't care.

His family had served as stewards at Zhang Manor for generations. It could be said that alive, he was Zhang Manor's man; dead, he was Zhang family's ghost.⁹ If Little Mister was a monster, then his son would be a monster's steward; there was no difference.

Zhang Xiaobao, upon hearing these words, sank into deep thought. Over there, Wang Juan also followed in contemplation; she had handled quite a few cases and prepared to pick out a similar type to draw a comparison.

Without waiting for Zhang Xiaobao to speak, after thinking for a while, Wang Juan spoke up: “I understand. That Swindler Song wants us to take in all of that cargo. Then, when it can't be sold, a big sum will be lost. How can there be something so expensive—100 wen [cash] for 1 dan [stone]? Talking like it sounded so good, whatever contrast-rich red and green.

Why not just lend money to him and obtain that 300 taels worth store of his. With a broker acting as insurance, it presumably wouldn't be cheated. Let's see how he talks by then? ”

“That'd really be getting taken in and deceived, ~ne. A broker guarantee¹⁰ has an effect? The store can be guaranteed; how can the stuff inside be guaranteed? Antiques and art, this stuff can be said to be faked just to be faked. Song Jing-gong can, when seeking the broker guarantee, use real objects and then wait until after he's signed the document with us to switch it out with fakes.

At that time, who will you go to? The broker really did guarantee the authentic article, how will you sue? When you think of finding Song Jing-gong, then it could also be said that it was just those items. You've already seen it; haven't there been times that these antiques and art were wrongly identified?”

Zhang Xiaobao picked out the flaws within Wang Juan's words. Wang Juan considered it so, too. Not even talking about the broker's original guarantee being authentic, even if they saw the items that had been switched, they could still say it was genuine, which was also a possibility. So she said:

“Then, it's that there are simply no items that have been transported here from elsewhere. He only wishes to sell that store to us. We can say we'll partner up with him to take on those 200 silver taels of cargo—see how he talks, then.”

“How do you know there's no cargo, ~ne? If it were me, I'd get

some cargo shipped here. This way, no matter which is chosen, you'll be taken in. That cargo should be very cheap. If you bought it, it would be 100 wen [cash] for 1 dan [stone]. Of course, maybe they'll let you bargain down the price." Zhang Xiaobao rebutted once again.

Wang Juan, hearing this, also had no solution. After all, the work she did before mostly had a vast amount of intelligence to support it as well as the law as a weapon; you could easily be able to find expert personnel in this area. Having come to the Tang dynasty, if she as an individual were to, say, command some troops, she could still get some results after adapting. But with just this little information, there was basically no way to judge.

"Then, you say how to do it? Treat him to a meal just to release him to go back?" Wang Juan looked at Zhang Xiaobao as she asked.

"Treat him to a meal and release him? He's dreaming, then. Treating him to a meal doesn't cost money, ~ah? Since he dares come swindling, then let's let him know about formidability. Steward Zhang, come here; I'll speak while you listen. Do as I say." Zhang Xiaobao gave a scornful smile as he called Steward Zhang over to come near in front of him.

Wang Juan, Zhang Xiaobao, and Steward Zhang huddled their heads together and whispered for a quarter-hour before Steward Zhang, bearing an expression of seeming comprehension and seeming puzzlement, left.

"Real dumb. When you mentioned it once, I understood it all; why doesn't he understand?" Wang Juan here was now reassured.

As she spoke, she reached out to pinch that chubby face of Zhang Xiaobao's once. Tilting her head to observe him for a moment, she then said:

“Impressive. Today, I've finally witnessed it; an International Criminal Swindler really can't be compared to those petty swindlers. If there were people like you in that Special 2 Division¹¹ of mine, then a swindler would be nabbed whenever a swindler was spotted. Let me thoroughly check—could it be that this head of yours was naturally born for the sake of swindling?”

“That'll do, the saliva has all been squeezed out. Don't you know a child's face can't be constantly pinched—this counts as what? All right, get down to business. Arrange the people well. I'll let that Song Jing-gong know what swindling is called.” Zhang Xiaobao batted away Wang Juan's little hand and summoned Xiaohong to start making the arrangements.

A quarter-hour later, while Steward Zhang and Song Jing-gong were eating and drinking, a few of Zhang Manor's people left and a few of Wang Manor's people also left.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan restarted anew the ball game, their contest evenly matched in wins and losses.

Song Jing-gong and Steward Zhang were also drinking wine as they spoke happily, chatting with great enjoyment.

When Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan had been playing for 1 hour and preparing to take a rest, Mrs. Zhang-Wang had also rushed

over and upon seeing the two children, she let out a sigh. This child's heart really was too ruthless. Walking in front of Zhang Xiaobao, she touched her son's face as she said:

“Xiaobao, you here are going to force Song Jing-gong to death, ~ah. Men should be spared when men should be spared.”¹²

“Mom, no, you [honorific] rest assured. Son¹³ has a personal plan—definitely won't force people to death. Son lacks people, ~ah. Just now, Steward Zhang listened to Child's¹⁴ method but simply couldn't comprehend it. Son doesn't want such a dumb person. Wait until Song Jing-gong is at the end of his rope,¹⁵ Son will give him a hand up so he can better work later on. Son can't always personally manage every matter, right?”

Zhang Xiaobao, knowing that his mother's heart wasn't that bad, gave an explanation.

Said like this, Mrs. Zhang-Wang was set at ease as she said: “My Baolang speaks correctly. Baolang is a great talent; commanding from the rear is fine—there are others to lead the charge to break the enemy ranks.”

Notes:

^{1]} Fan/番 is the character assigned to label lands that are not within China proper. Because the full term of “fan bang” (番邦) has connotations meaning uncultured or uncouth since it was the traditional label Imperial China applied to all foreign states that they viewed with a [condescending attitude](#), I have chosen to

translate this character as barbarian. Contrast this with the more linguistically neutral tone of wai/外 for “outside/external” and yi/異 for “foreign/alien.” Note that this fan/番 is different from the character for fan/藩 as fan/藩 is the label traditionally applied to fiefs that are considered totally subordinate and part of China proper, even if these fiefs were large enough to be kingdoms in and of themselves. They are homophones and the characters are also visually similar because of the similarity in their concepts but the key to remember is that fan/藩 was the label for territories considered part of Imperial China even if they were ruled independently by a feudal lord whose influence and power might rival the Emperor’s while fan/番 was the label for areas that were considered foreign, even if the territories in question were highly influenced by the Imperial Chinese government to the point of having a subordinate [tributary relationship](#) like with Korea or Vietnam. Fan/藩 is also likely the basis for the [Japanese Han system](#).

2] Dan/石 is the the [Chinese measurement unit for volume](#) that traditionally weighed anywhere from 100 to 103 liters (~26-27 gallons) before being standardized in modern times to be equivalent to 100 liters as the market dan (shidan/市石). This unit was typically used to measure cereal grains like rice or wheat. By the way, the character used here of 石 is usually pronounced “shi” and literally means “stone” in Chinese but it is pronounced differently only when used in this context as a measurement unit, which is a linguistic anomaly called a [homograph](#). This unit has some relation to the weight measurement unit, the [picul](#), which is a homophone in Chinese (dan/擔). To confuse matters more, the picul is sometimes written using the character for [stone](#) (石) as well and that’s not even considering the fact that there is also an [Imperial unit](#) for weight in English called a [stone](#), too.

3] “Jian yan yu di” ([嬌艷欲滴](#)) is a 4-character couplet used in Chinese to describe objects that are tender and beautiful while dripping with a liquid like dew. Obviously, flowers and women are usually the objects of such praise. So Song Jing-gong is basically using hyperbole here in order to sell Steward Zhang on the value of this plant he is importing.

4] The original text uses “jiao xiang er ying” ([交相而映](#)) which I assume is meant to be “jiao xiang hui ying” ([交相輝映](#)). It is a bit hard to translate for me but broken down into its individual characters, it roughly means “cross exchange bright reflection.” To illustrate its usage, this would be a phrase to use when describing a color photograph printed on laminated paper.

5] “[Ya kuai](#)” ([牙儻](#)) literally means “tooth broker” even though this profession has little to do with dentistry. The reason why teeth (ya/牙) as a character became associated with the name for this profession, forming the basis for many of the slang terms used to refer to these brokers (ex: yaren/[牙人](#) or “tooth person,” yalang/[牙郎](#) or “tooth man,” yashang/[牙商](#) or “tooth merchant,” etc.) was because the character meaning mutual (hu/[互](#)) was erroneously written and the mistake stuck. These brokers rose as a profession due to how Chinese society was structured where people were roughly categorized into [4 occupational groups](#) ([士農工商](#)), which was, in order of rank, the [scholar-gentry](#) (shi/[士](#)), farmers ([農](#)), crafters ([工](#)), and merchants ([商](#)). Because the merchants were traditionally looked down upon leading to discrimination or ostracization, it impeded the communication and social networks necessary for a successful trading business in ancient China. Thus, brokers served as middle men and a human communication network to bridge that gap, fulfilling many functions that could involve things like acting as prototypical notaries by facilitating, drawing up, and standing witness to the signing of contracts and

other documents; as auditors or guarantors in evaluating prospective sale goods, stating their condition before sale, and testifying to this in court if disputes arise after the transaction; holding things in escrow; also, helping people sell and buy items. Some brokers specialized in certain areas while others were jack-of-all-trades.

6] “Fu di chou xin” (釜底抽薪) is a 4-character idiom that describes using a drastic tactic to solve a situation by pulling the kindling out from under the cauldron and has the same meaning as the English expression of “nipping things in the bud.”

7] What is spoken here is the first 4-character half of a 8 character long quote “yi ren ji duan, er ren ji chang” (一人計短, 二人計長). Like other 8-character couplets, the first 4 characters tend to act as a shorthand reference to the whole expression even if it doesn’t make any sense without the latter unspoken half. The meaning is more apparent when the entire sentence is translated: “one person is short on calculation, two people are long on calculation.” It is the Chinese version of the English saying with a similar message: “two heads are better than one.”

8] “Zhu chui pao” (豬吹泡) is a regional folksy term for a pig’s bladder so it won’t show up in any formal Chinese dictionaries.

9] Steward Zhang is professing his loyalty using a common speech pattern for such situations where you replace X for the object to whom you’re professing loyalty to: “Sheng shi X de ren, shi shi X de gui” (生是X的人, 死是X的鬼). The Chinese believed that if you don’t belong to a clan and aren’t worshipped by descendants with the proper funerary rites, you would become a feral ghost,

doomed to starve forever in the afterlife. The inverse of this belief is then also assumed—properly buried and venerated ancestors mean that their ghostly spirits are affiliated with the clans or families that they belonged to in life after they die as well. So basically, this expression is a standard way for people, especially subordinates, to profess eternal loyalty and their undying resolve where they will be loyal to their master or organization in life as a living person as well as in death as a ghostly spirit.

[10\]](#) Though “dan bao” (擔保) can mean “insurance,” in this case, it is really more of a guarantee that vouches for the product’s saleability since the broker won’t replace or offset any losses incurred by the buyer and it is still very much a buyer beware situation. The guarantee of the broker is typically gained during business deals since their presence as the middle man acts as another witness to the transaction as well as a safeguard; they stake their reputation and credibility to evaluate and verify the value of the goods being sold; and though they don’t play a direct role in enforcing the contract in case there is any wrongdoing, they can testify officially if the authorities are called in for judgment.

[11\]](#) I wasn’t able to determine what specific division of the police that Wang Juan belongs to so I just translated the Chinese, “Te Er Chu” (特二處), literally as “Special 2 Division.”

[12\]](#) “De rao ren chu qie rao ren” (得饒人處且饒人) is an expression that professes showing mercy when possible because people are people (and err). The phrasing is very compact and has a bit of wordplay, which was a bit hard for me to convey in the translation thus leading to this footnote.

[13\]](#) Xiaobao is referring to [himself in the third person](#), which is a normal linguistic behavior in Chinese. So I translated erzi/兒子 as simply “Son” even if it reads weirdly in English because Xiaobao is self-identifying as Mrs. Zhang-Wang’s son and emphasizing that he is addressing her in this capacity.

[14\]](#) This is the same deal as when Xiaobao was addressing himself as “Son” but using the word meaning child, “hai-er” (孩兒) instead.

[15\]](#) I replaced the 4-character couplet with a roughly equivalent English saying because it would require too much explaining in-text to unravel the idiomatic meaning if it were translated literally. “Shan qiong shui jin” ([山窮水盡](#)) means “dearth of mountains and end of (river) water” to illustrate hitting a dead end and having nowhere else to go.

Chapter 19: Cherished Troops Of Godly Speed Show Humanity

Song Jing-gong originally didn't intend to drink too much of this meal's wine and just lightly taste several cups. But after several cups, he still got blurry, bending over to lie down there while his mouth still spoke non-stop words of flattery toward Steward Zhang.

Steward Zhang was also swaying a bit. He knew that his own alcohol limit was not like this but it had all been done by Little Mister. It wasn't that the wine had been drugged but rather, it had been cooked in advance by people using a brazier within this somewhat narrow dining hall.

He didn't know what oxygen deficiency was and didn't know what was called a partial temperature increase in order to accelerate a person's blood circulation so that the alcohol could more quickly affect the brain.

He only knew that since Little Mister had said this, then it absolutely couldn't be wrong. After completing the arrangements for Song Jing-gong to rest, he went out again to do other things.

When Song Jing-gong woke up, it was already in the afternoon. After being fed wine sobering soup¹ by the maid servant attending him, in a semi-conscious daze, he faintly heard someone speaking.

“Steward Zhang, who allowed you to decide on your own? Could it be that within your eyes, there isn't my existence?”

Listening, it sounded like a woman. Song Jing-gong used his hands to rub at that still aching head as he bent his ear to listen carefully.

“No, this little one dares not. This little one only thinks that Mister Song has done well with his business. Thus, I thought to get some money. If Mistress won’t allow it, then this little one will go send him away.”

Song Jing-gong had now finally heard clearly. Speaking at the moment was that Steward Zhang. When he considered Zhang Manor’s situation, obviously, the person that could make Steward Zhang so fearful was that Mrs. Zhang-Wang.

Seeing that mistress was wanting to drive him away, Song Jing-gong was at once anxious. He was just preparing to come out and explain everything when he heard Mrs. Zhang-Wang speak again: “Steward Zhang, since the manor has been handed over to you, you will have to drum up 120% mental will. You must not allow people to fool you.”

“Mistress, you [honorific] rest assured, I absolutely won’t be swindled. That Mister Song isn’t that kind of person.” Just when Song Jing-gong worried that he’d be seen through, Steward Zhang’s voice rose up.

“Humph, not what kind of person? Could it be that you received his gift and are speaking on his behalf? I have heard people talking. That Song Jing-gong actually moved to Ge Manor to stay

yesterday; this is wanting to flee after swindling the money.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang’s voice was heard once again.

Song Jing-gong felt a bit aggrieved upon hearing these words. If he could go out to explain it, he would definitely rush out to say that the people of the two manors in front of him were really too cheating.

But he had no way to say this. Did that Mrs. Zhang-Wang recognize who he was? If he really did rush out, then that would be unwise, ~ne.

Bearing a trace of concern, Song Jing-gong listened attentively over there as he hoped that at this time, Steward Zhang could put in a few good words for him. As expected, Steward Zhang spoke up there.

“In reply to Mistress’s words, I have already sounded out Mister Song today—especially while drinking wine. Mister Song, this person is really not bad. As for his going to another manor to rest, according to this little one’s guess, it certainly must be that manor has an acquaintance of Mister Song’s.”

“Fine, no need to say more. How could I be someone who can’t even clearly see through people? If he’s not trustworthy, then send people to follow that one surnamed Song. If my guess isn’t wrong, he basically doesn’t have any goods. During these several days, once he gets the money, he’ll go into hiding.

That store of his simply isn’t worth 300 silver taels. To not have

seen even what the merchandise is like and you still dare to make this kind of plan, how can this manor be given to you to manage in the future? Humph!”

That displeased voice of Mrs. Zhang-Wang’s once again rose up, setting Song Jing-gong off into a startled jolt. He didn’t fear people investigating him but did fear if this Mrs. Zhang-Wang directly vetoed his suggestion. If it really was like that, then wouldn’t the money he had spent several days ago have inconvenienced others in vain?

Only after listening for a moment until the sound of a person’s footsteps gradually went away did Song Jing-gong slump down to sit on the small stool next to the windowsill as he considered what to do later on.

He waited until after he couldn’t hear any more sounds before he heard that Steward Zhang who hadn’t yet left summon people.

“Go call for Xiaoqi. Wait until Mister Song has left the courtyard to follow him. If you discover that he intends to leave, then swiftly return here to report to me.”

After an individual voiced confirmation and left, only then did Song Jing-gong sigh in relief as he inwardly resolved to not let people see any telling ‘horse hooves’² no matter what. Then, secretly walking back in front of the couch to lie down there fully clothed while suppressing his headache, he fixed his eyes at the ceiling as he deliberated on how he should swindle this Zhang Manor’s money.

He didn't think the Mrs. Zhang-Wang as mentioned by Steward Zhang would return so early—is this coincidence? Was it due to having heard of his arrival or lack of confidence in Steward Zhang that they purposefully worked like this?

With this lie down, Song Jing-gong blearily fell asleep, only waking until it had reached evening time. Rising up to leave the couch, he just thought of looking for Steward Zhang to take his leave when he heard Steward Zhang's voice coming from outside the window.

“Has Mister Song woken up yet?”

“This servant doesn't know; Mister Song has never exited the door.”

“Unh, wait until I've gone in to look; instruct people to prepare the food and wine.”

Song Jing-gong hearing the sound, feigned an appearing of having just woken up as he opened eyes hazy with sleep and waiting for Steward Zhang to enter through the door, he yawned as he said: “Steward Zhang drinks wine well. Ever since the meal, this Song still knew what was spoken of with Steward Zhang but afterwards, everything was actually forgotten—even how this room was reached can't be clearly remembered.”

“Mister Song here is facing the manor without any qualms to be able to be so at ease drinking wine. This Zhang can't do that. All of

the big and small, great and little matters of the manor must be taken care of so drinking wine also needs to be held back a fraction. Otherwise, it'd be unknown what troubles will arise."

Steward Zhang, his face bearing a smile, entered while looking toward Song Jing-gong as he laughingly spoke.

Song Jing-gong had no time to appraise the veracity of these words as he used his hand to press on his forebrow and said: "Looking at the sky outside, dusk should have arrived; this Song here won't overly disturb you. Wait a few days later when that cargo has arrived, I will once again discuss in detail with Steward Zhang."

"No hurry, no hurry. Go after having eaten dinner. People at the manor are all not so clever; to want to find a person to have conversations with is a struggle. Mister Song has managed to come by this once so at any rate, you mustn't just leave like this." Steward Zhang tried to intercept him.

"Many thanks to Steward Zhang's good intentions. Only 'tis a pity that this Song can't overcome the wine's strength as up to this moment, still have a splitting headache. Drinking isn't possible, drinking really isn't possible. After a few days, this Song will come by again."

Song Jing-gong, whatever was said, wouldn't eat here. What he wanted to do now was to put on a show to let people trust him. Whether he ate a meal or not was even more unimportant.

Steward Zhang said a few words of persuasion again but Song Jing-gong persisted so with reluctance, he escorted Song Jing-gong outside of the gates. Then, he stood there, unwilling to turn back for a long time.

If switched with another person, they would already be moved but Song Jing-gong knew that there was a person called Xiaoqi who should be tailing him from a place he himself couldn't see. Thinking on it, he decided to stay in the house of the Zhang Manor's peasantry. Spending some money was of no matter but at least it allowed that Mrs. Zhang-Wang to be relieved.

The darkness of the night fell as the few people who had left Zhang Manor and Wang Manor continued hurrying on the road.

The nearest from the manor should be the Wei River³ if you wished to use boats to ship the goods and travel a bit less on the road. But the nearest from that side of Sanshui County was actually Luo River.⁴ According to the judgment of Song Jing-gong's modus operandi, he should be stowing the cargo over there.

For the sake of not having it go awry, people were sent to both sides to investigate. Besides this, there were two more people heading to Sanshui County to set up there. The groups of people had been instructed that no matter where they went, they were all not allowed to reveal their identities.

Xinping City,⁵ several tens of li [mile]⁶ away from Tuqiao Village, welcomed two dust-ridden and travel-worn people in this early morning. These two people didn't directly enter the city but in a

place not far from the city, casually found a manor to stay in accordance to instructions. After sleeping well, they only woke up when it was after noon. After freshening up, they leisurely threw several copper coins to the family they borrowed lodging from before going out to ask around in all four directions where there were houses to be sold.

When others asked, they would say they came from afar and wished to find a house to reside in this place. After 1 hour, they finally found a family of people willing to sell a house and not caring that it was late in the day, dragged the people along to purchase the house that day.

One of them stayed behind to clean the house and hired people to raise a kang [bed-stove]. The other person hurriedly rushed back—it really was a starry night gallop. Returning to Zhang Manor in the ox hour⁷ at a quarter till 3AM, they ignored their exhaustion after entering the door and went straight to the courtyard within which Zhang Xiaobao was sleeping. Once in front of the door, they breathed heavily while making their report.

“Zhang Si⁸ has returned as commanded and purchased a house in Little Ox Manor, 2 li [mile] outside of Xinping City, being fortunate to have not shamed your commands.”

Finished speaking, the man was already too tired to stand up. Crouching down there with one hand on the ground, he kept on heavily huffing.

Hearing the noise, Xiaohong woke up Zhang Xiaobao and Wang

Juan. The two of them exchanged a look before hurriedly getting up, letting Xiaohong carry them off the couch to light the lanterns and go out towards the door. Zhang Xiaobao even strained to hold up a bowl of water that had been placed by the couch.

Arriving outside and seeing that appearance of Zhang Si's under the moonlight, Zhang Xiaobao nodded as he presented the water and said: "Well done, the Zhang Family will prosper because of you."

"Thank you, Little Mister. The house has been bought. Little Mister, please command me." Zhang Si took the bowl chugged it all down in one breath with a "gu-lu-lu" sound and after using a hand to wipe his mouth, he respectfully answered.

"Unh, that's good. Go find Yingtao. Let her make the arrangements for the remaining work. Have to also trouble you for this one trip. Remember to be careful on the road." Zhang Xiaobao, seeing that one matter had been accomplished, smiled and nodded as he spoke.

After Zhang Si had left, he then turned his head to say to Wang Juan: "This is the people that I, Zhang Xiaobao, want. How is the efficiency compared to that Special 2 Division of yours?"

"No more than ordinary. Don't suppose that all the people of that place of mine all loaf around.⁹ The other 3 routes you sent out still haven't come back, ~ne." Wang Juan curled her lips as she disdainfully spoke.

“Didn’t mean to belittle that side of yours—I was just asking. Let’s return to sleep. Looks like we won’t need to go to sleep immediately. Let’s have milk first—a bit hungry right now.”

Zhang Xiaobao gave a “hei-hei” in laughter, then seeing his mother standing by the doorway, he sprinted two steps to throw himself into his mother’s embrace to play at being a child. Wang Juan rubbed her belly and discovering that there really wasn’t anything inside, also followed and walked over.

The Luo River banks also had two people over there that didn’t sleep as they watched those few boats moored at the docks, secretly observing using that periodic flash of the lamp light to carefully record the red and green item sticking out from the boat.

“Xiaomazi,^{[10](#)} you stay here to keep tight watch; I’ll return to report. The Zhang Family’s Little Mister is still waiting, ~ne.” One person looked for a while and feeling that they could remember the item’s appearance, spoke to the other person. When that other person nodded, they turned around to disappear into the darkness of the night.

The remaining person resisted the fatigue as they laid down on the grassy ground, allowing the dew to gradually soak their clothes as they motionlessly kept watch over the situation and listened to the conversation of the two people standing guard over there.

Notes:

^{[1](#)} The original Chinese text is “xing jiu tang” (醒酒湯), which is a soup that the Chinese believed could help sober you up and deal

with hangovers. An alternate name is “jie jiu tang” ([解酒湯](#)), which could be translated as “wine detox soup.” They are essentially home remedies for drunkenness or hangovers. These soups are also the basis for the Korean hangover cure soup called [Haejangguk](#) ([해장국/解酲국](#)).

2] The Chinese idiom here literally means “horse’s feet” or “hooves” ([majiao/馬腳](#)), which is used to depict a betraying or telling sign that something is wrong or false. It would be similar in concept to a tell or giveaway to know when someone is bluffing in poker or lying.

3] The “Wei Shui” ([渭水](#)) mentioned here is more than likely the [Wei River](#) ([渭河](#)), which is a river in the [Shaanxi](#) ([陝西](#)) Province.

4] I haven’t been able to definitely confirm this but “Luo Shui He” ([羅水河](#)), which basically means “Luo water river,” is probably the [Luo River](#) ([洛河](#)), a tributary of the [Wei River](#) in [Shaanxi Province](#). The reason I’m not sure is because there are several Luo rivers in China and the characters used for the real-life Luo River is completely different from the one named here. It is possible that the name the author gives is a historical name for the modern-day river that I am tentatively associating it with that isn’t coming up in my research though.

5] “Xinping Chen” ([新平城](#)) is a city whose name means “new flat.” I haven’t been able to locate it on a map but it could be a city that the author made up or is the historical name of a defunct city or town or an outdated name for a city or town that is now no longer well known.

6] [Li/里](#) is the [Chinese measurement unit for length](#) and like other traditional units, could vary in value over history. It has been an unit that could measure anywhere from 405 meters to over 500 meters, which for the sake of reference is around a third of 1 mile long. In modern times, it has been standardized to be exactly 500 meters and can be divided into 1,500 [chi](#). Because its relation to the other measurements for length is similar to the mile in comparison to the foot in the [Imperial unit system](#), I will mark mile in text next to it to remind readers what role it plays as the Chinese version of it but since it is not actually equal to a mile, I will obviously not be converting its value.

7] “Chou Shi” (丑時) is the 2 hour span of the day assigned to the [Ox](#) that spans from 1:00 to 2:59AM. Since the Chinese divided the day into 12 2-hour units [shichen](#) (時辰) and there are 12 animals of the [Chinese zodiac](#), each twelfth of the day is assigned a zodiac animal as one of the Earthly Branches. If you know the order of the zodiac, you know the order of the hours. The 12 [Earthly Branches](#) were combined with the 10 [Heavenly Stems](#) to produce a cycle of [sexagenary cycle](#) of 60 terms in what was a very ancient Chinese way of counting days or years that is now no longer relevant to keeping the calendar current though it comes up for certain ceremonies or rituals as well as in areas like astrology or fortune-telling.

8] The name of “Zhang Si” (張四) is basically the Zhang surname with the number 4 as the given name.

9] Wang Juan literally says “chi xian fan” (吃閒飯) which translates to “eat idle rice,” slang for people who do nothing but loaf around and eat rice (i.e. useless). Since the English verb “to loaf” has both an association with food (i.e. loaf of bread) and

meaning associated with idleness, this explains my translation choice.

[10\]](#) “Xia Ma Zi” (小麻子) can either mean “little pockmark” or “little hemp child.” Either way, it’s an interesting name.

Chapter 20: Family Sharing A Meal Full Of Bliss

The flowing water of the river gurgled with cotton like clouds overhead as the green of a few leaves outlined the flower color and the breeze lightly brushed against the face. Today was an overcast day.

Seeing such weather, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were both also happy as they finally no longer needed to endure the sun while exercising. The two of them went to the courtyard to throw around a sandbag—a real sandbag, the outside being a layer of fine hemp cloth and the insides filled with sand, which was slightly larger than a quail egg, just right for the grasp of a small hand.

Xiaohong observed from the side, her eyes tightly staring at that sandbag flying to and fro in the air, terrified that the two little ancestors when throwing it to each other would throw it at the other's face.

When they were playing happily, a servant carrying a basket walked over and gently placed the basket on the ground as they said to Wang Juan: “Little Miss, according to your [honorific] orders, the item has been purchased. The surrounding area has been gone over in a circle to buy these.”

“Unh, good. Go busy yourself. Oh, go to that storehouse of Xiaobao's and get two large bones. Pick the ones with more meat to bring back to boil soup for your family's kids to drink.”

Wang Juan caught the sandbag in her hand and stopped as she spoke to this servant. The reward used was naturally the stuff from that storehouse of Zhang Xiaobao's.

After the servant gave thanks and departed, Zhang Xiaobao ran over next to the basket, going on tip-toes as his eyes peered inside.

“What is this stuff? It looks familiar.” Zhang Xiaobao asked.

“Of course, it's familiar. It's saltpeter—saltpeter¹ that's not that pure. I specifically had people buy it.” Wang Juan explained.

“Saltpeter?” Zhang Xiaobao, upon hearing this name, started looking around.

“Looking for what, ~ne? It's saltpeter.”

“Looking for charcoal and sulfur,² ~ne.” Zhang Xiaobao said.

Wang Juan gave Zhang Xiaobao an eye roll and also walked over to look at the saltpeter: “Imagining what? I didn't say to make gunpowder.”³

“Well, can't buy so much just to treat illnesses, right?” Zhang Xiaobao was still searching for the two other items.

“Stupid, Erniu's finished making that hot pot and already sent it

into the courtyard house. I want to drink some soup, eat two tender pieces of meat. Use the saltpeter to make ice to freeze the lamb meat, and then use a scraper⁴ to scrape it off into slices. When slice after slice has all curled up, it'll be thinner than being carved and eating it will be convenient."

Wang Juan spoke as she reached her arms inside the basket to dig out a small piece of saltpeter, weighing it in her hands before nodding her head, feeling that it was not bad.

"Oh, can eat hot pot now. An overcast day is just right. Eating till full, then sleeping—that's what comfort is, ne. Large meat slices, I won't count on it but scooping up some froth is fine, ah."

Zhang Xiaobao upon hearing that there was hot pot, then naturally wanted frozen lamb meat. Ordering Xiaohong to go get two basins, one large and one small, both respectively filled with water and to place the saltpeter inside the large basin, he then continued throwing a sandbag with Wang Juan.

When the water inside the small basin had also frozen into ice, only then did he order people to send over the fresh lamb meat to be frozen. Naturally, there were also people preparing the other food, finding a new scraper, and getting the charcoal. They also had people go to Erniu's house to get a jar of that water used to soak the mountain chili sprouts in. All that remained was waiting for the lamb meat to freeze and be scraped so that they could start eating.

Wang Juan wasn't idle either as she called for people to go clarify

a broth⁵ of pork bones and chicken, even scrounging up some dried seafood—this stuff was cheap. They first used warm water to soak it to be used as the soup base⁶ in a while.

This wait wasn't a short time. It was almost nearly noon when the lamb meat was finally done. As for the beef, that stuff wasn't good to butcher—it easily attracted trouble⁷ so they couldn't eat it for the time being.

Having played till they were sweaty all over, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan took a bath before accompanying Zhang Xiaobao's family members, sitting at the table. It was described as sitting but it really was being carried in people's arms.

Positioned in the middle of the table was that hot pot. Inside the tube, red-hot charcoal was placed. Within the cover was a hole in the pot lid. The length added on top was a smoke funnel. When a "gu-lu" sound came out of the inside there, the water had boiled. By removing the smoke funnel and lifting the lid, they could then swish⁸ stuff in it to eat.

Fermented tofu,⁹ stinky tofu,¹⁰ chive flowers, soy sauce,¹¹ mature vinegar,¹² and other seasonings were all set up using saucers and placed there. Whoever wanted to eat could get it themselves.

Zhang Xiaobao's parents, grandfather, and grandmother sat there in a circle according to etiquette. The both of them, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, were being carried by Xiaohong in her

arms, one with each hand.

The adults knew that this was the hot pot that Xiaobao specifically had people make for them. Smelling the scent of the seafood and the soup inside that pot, they felt that it wasn't bad but weren't clear on how to eat it.

"Mom, eat, ~ya. I'll swish a slice of lamb meat for you [honorific]." Zhang Xiaobao, seeing that everyone was all sitting there watching, could only exert himself as he held the chopsticks to tremulously pick up a slice of lamb meat and reaching into the pot, gently swayed there.

Xiaohong was afraid of that boiling soup splattering on Little Mister's body and wanted to reach out a hand to block it but since she couldn't spare a hand, she could only strive to pull him back.

"Don't pull. It's easy to get burned. It's done." Zhang Xiaobao gave a warning. Then, after moving it twice, he took out that piece of meat that had changed in color, and put it into his mother's dish.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang's eyes suddenly reddened. She opened her mouth to eat that meat. It was gone with just a "ba-da" sound. Not even tasting what flavor it had been, she energetically gave praise: "Tasty, the stuff my Baolang made is just good. Dad [in-law], Mom [in-law], and Husband should all eat."

At once, everyone moved according to their own eating habits, getting two servings of seasonings with the mountain chili sprout

water placed in one.

Meanwhile, Zhang Xiaobao, Wang Juan, and Xiaohong watched from the side as they all swallowed their saliva. Xiaohong couldn't eat together with them. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan couldn't eat such large pieces of meat and could only wait until everyone had almost finished swishing and had left behind some bits and pieces in the pot before they could drink it as soup.

“Xiaohong, no need to carry us. We'll stand while watching. You eat, too.”

As it was a low table, the group was all sitting on small stools, also called Turkic stools.¹³ Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan standing to the side was fine but seeing Xiaohong staring over there, they felt uncomfortable. If they hadn't let people enter, they could forget about it but since they were sitting together, then just staring wouldn't do.

Zhang Xiaobao struggled free of Xiaohong's embrace as he commanded her.

How could Xiaohong dare to use the chopsticks so she vigorously shook her head.

Wang Juan also broke free to get down as she said: “Telling you to eat so you eat. More people would be funner.”

“Xiaohong, let's eat together. These few days, you've

conscientiously taken care of Xiaobao and Juan-Juan. Just treat it as us rewarding you.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang finally spoke up. Only then did Xiaohong give thanks and carefully began to eat.

Five people were eating besides the two children. Zhang Xiaobao watched as he rejected Xiaohong who wanted to get him soup to drink and used a spoon to scoop up a bit of tofu himself to put into the pot to scald it before placing it in Wang Juan’s dish.

“Eat. In a while, eat duck blood, too. These things can still be eaten.”

Wang Juan wasn’t polite, either, as she mixed her own ingredients. Inserting the chopsticks into the tofu, she dipped it before she began to nibble on it. When she finished eating, she stuck out her tongue: “Real spicy.”

Zhang Xiaobao scalded some tofu for himself, too; the back of that little hand already had a few red dots. Xiaohong seeing this now was scared silly. Before, she hadn’t even noticed.

She hurriedly grabbing onto Zhang Xiaobao’s hand to look at it. The other people also saw this situation and tensed up. Only Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan didn’t have any expression.

“Xiaohong, you eat yours. No need to mind Xiaobao. This little burn is nothing.” Wang Juan spoke up. She knew she and Zhang Xiaobao belonged to the same type of people. They were indifferent to this little bit of pain that didn’t even count as an injury. She trusted that even if a layer of skin from that hand of

Zhang Xiaobao's was burned off and Zhang Xiaobao wanted to kill someone, then his hand wouldn't tremble for even a little bit.

"Unh, right. It doesn't even burn a bit. It's just hot. I can eat by myself for I'm a monster." Zhang Xiaobao said with a smile, two little dimples showing on that chubby face.

"What monster? It's divine sage. Don't listen to your Dad's blind blather. Xiaohong, since Xiaobao can do it himself, then let him eat by himself for my son isn't an ordinary person."

Mrs. Zhang-Wang was a bit pained but she still chose to support her own son.

"It's all stuff in the past, why still mention it? Mom, I'll pluck a shrimp for you [honorific] to eat."

Father Zhang, seeing that his missus was about to revive an old topic and fearful that he'd be lectured by his Dad and Mom again, scalded three shrimp and respectively gave his Dad and Mom as well as Mrs. Zhang-Wang the extracted red-colored meat.

"It's noon. How come the people sent to Sanshui County still haven't transmitted the news back here? "

Zhang Xiaobao used the ladle to scoop up from the pot some lamb meat that his family members had deliberately mashed up, including the soup and the green colored chopped scallions, to pour it all into the little bowl that Wang Juan was holding up with

both hands. The two of them drank it one sip, one person at a time before he suddenly thought of the matter in that side of Sanshui County so he casually asked about it.

“There shouldn’t be a problem. What I’m most worried about isn’t that side but which river will the boat actually moor in—what if the boat hasn’t arrived, what do we do?” Wang Juan drank a mouthful of soup as she talked while she, out of habit, surveyed the table in a circle.

“This isn’t urgent. I trust that those two rivers will definitely have results. This Swindler Song, I’m relatively acquainted with his mentality. What are you looking for?” Zhang Xiaobao, seeing Wang Juan’s motion, asked.

“Cellophane noodles.¹⁴ I forgot—there’s none here.” This time, Wang Juan was using lip speech.

“This, I’ve never made. I do know the approximate stuff. When I was small, there was a starch plant by the orphanage; the water inside the river was all white. If I’d known earlier, going inside to get a look at how people made them would have been good.

Going back, have people use wheat to make it. Isn’t it just to first make starch? If 10 silver taels are slammed down, it definitely can be produced. It also works out to be able to make some small profit. Unfortunately, there’s no spicy sauce to eat today.”

Zhang Xiaobao pondered with some effort but in the end, he couldn’t remember how cellophane noodles were produced. He

didn't really like eating this stuff as trying it occasionally was fine but he had never taken it to heart.

“No problem. Someday, have people make mianpi¹⁵ to eat. This, I know how to make. When I was little, in the compound, there was a household that made this. I would frequently go help knead the dough to play.” Wang Juan, seeing Zhang Xiaobao's lip speech, said in consolation.

The two of them were currently there exchanging lip speech, ~ne. Xiaohong had already hurriedly finished eating, not daring to eat her fill and just getting two bits of each dish before putting down her chopsticks.

Zhang Xiaobao also knew that for Xiaohong to be able to eat several mouthfuls had already taken a large amount of resolution. Seeing that it also wasn't good for her to keep staying there at the side, he said to her: “Xiaohong, you go look to see how Xiaoqi over there is doing. It's necessary to have Swindler Song stay here for a few days.”

Xiaohong complied and departed while here, eating and drinking continued.

If not discussing the lack of business here, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan could relax. They didn't use lip speech, either, as they drank soup and ate things in piecemeal while analyzing the plans for afterwards.

Meanwhile, the adults didn't really speak up as they ate while

gazing at the two little guys and listening to them spout out those types of words that only adults should be able to speak as the smiles never left their faces. Finally, they needn't ever worry over whether the next generation would send this family business into ruin.

The most despondent was Father Zhang. He kept feeling like the two children weren't normal but seeing that the three other people who he couldn't antagonize all had appearances of this being only natural, he couldn't say anything at all.

Then, thinking better on it that being like this was also good since after Xiaobao grew up, maybe he could return from the test as a valedictorian. Thus, he said to his son: "Xiaobao, want to learn to read and write with Father?"

"Want to, am learning now. From now on, Dad will have to be troubled." Zhang Xiaobao gulped down the soup, nodding as he spoke to his father.

Notes:

[1\]](#) "Xiao shi" ([硝石](#)) refers to saltpeter or [niter](#)—more specifically, the mineral form of potassium nitrate (KNO_3). It is a substance with many industrial applications, making it of significant value in modern times even with advances in technology. The two major uses of potassium nitrate are as agricultural fertilizers and in the production of gunpowder.

[2\]](#) "Liu huang" ([硫磺](#)) is the Chinese name for [sulfur](#). It was commonly used in experiments by [Daoist alchemists](#) as well as for

practical applications in [traditional Chinese medicine](#).

3] Just in case people don't recall enough chemistry to be able to figure out what Xiaobao is alluding to, the basic recipe for [gunpowder](#) or black powder as invented by the Chinese requires sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate (saltpeter/niter).

4] A baozi/包子 actually translates to [planer](#) but since that word typically refers to various types of handicraft tools used in carpentry, woodworking, and metalworking in both Chinese and English, I am assuming that Juan-Juan is referring to the thin scraped slices a planer is capable of. For that reason, I ended up translating it as "scraper" even though that's not the standard name of any existent tool to convey the function and to try to avoid reader confusion if I used the literal translation.

5] "Diao tang" (吊湯) is a form of refined [Chinese soup](#) called a "clarified broth." So to diao/吊 a soup is to clarify it. This meaning of clarification only holds true in the context of soup. Otherwise, diao/吊 simply translates to "hang."

6] "Guo di" (鍋底) literally translates to "pot bottom," which in this case refers to the [soup base](#) used for the [hot pot](#).

7] The bull was highly valued for its labor in Chinese agriculture, gaining them a protected status that was enforced by the government by making it mandatory to report bovine deaths to the local magistrate and paying a fine if it was deliberately butchered for the purposes of meat consumption. This explains why pork and chicken was typically the most consumed meat in the ancient Chinese diet since for the majority of the population, eating beef

with any frequency was not feasible.

[8\]](#) The character used here is shuan/涮 which simply means to rinse or boil in liquid. However, I made use of the naming sense behind one of the [Japanese versions of hot pot](#) and chose to translate it as “swish” to try to convey the action used in order to boil or rinse the ingredients in the hot pot soup.

[9\]](#) The text uses “fu ru” (腐乳) though it can also be referred to as “dou fu ru” (豆腐乳) or “lu fu” (鹵腐). I’ve translated it as [fermented tofu](#) though it can be referred to as fermented bean curd, soy cheese, tofu cheese, or preserved tofu. As evident with some of the possible names, it is tofu that has been fermented until it is similar in texture to cheese. However, it is not a cheese, which is made through a different chemical process.

[10\]](#) [Stinky tofu](#) or “chou dou fu” (臭豆腐) is a specific type of fermented tofu known for its decidedly strong smell. Sometimes, it is said to be tastier the stronger the smell is. Needless to say, it can be an acquired taste for some people. However, it is very popular in Asia with many different regional varieties and is often sold as a street food or snack.

[11\]](#) The Chinese term for [soy sauce](#) is “jiang you” (醬油), which literally translates to “sauce oil.”

[12\]](#) “Chen Cu” (陳醋) literally means “aged vinegar” but actually refers to a specific type of [black vinegar](#) called “mature vinegar.” Other than its flavor, it is also believed to have medicinal properties as well. For reference, an European counterpart of an aged vinegar would be [balsamic vinegar](#).

[13\]](#) “Hu deng” (胡凳) was so called because it was a portmanteau of “hu ren” (胡人), a general appellation the Chinese applied to foreigners, and “ban deng” (板凳) for stool. Hu/胡 (meaning wild, foolish, and reckless) was said to be one of the names first applied to the [Xiongnu](#) and then was generalized to apply to other foreign people as well, primarily the nomadic tribes like the [Mongols](#) and the [Tatars](#). The reason stools and chairs were sometimes referred to as belonging to these tribes is because these furniture styles were imported into China and then categorized underneath one general label. Prior to the advent of such furniture, the proper Chinese sitting position was to kneel down with home furnishings designed for elevated platforms or dais to accommodate this posture. The traditional Japanese [seiza](#) is likely influenced by this behavior. This foreign “hu” (胡) style was not just attributed to furniture as there were also clothing, cuisine, accessories, etc. Riding clothes in Chinese are referred to as “hu fu” (胡服) or “Turkic dress” for this reason. Because the Chinese name for this type of stool is similar in thinking to the reason for name of the [Turkish ottoman](#) and [Turkic](#) as a people ethnically encompasses many of the tribes the Chinese placed under such a blanket label, I am translating “hu deng” (胡凳) as Turkic stool.

[14\]](#) [Cellophane noodles](#) have various names in Chinese. Wang Juan used “fen tiao” (粉條) but they can also be called “fen si” (粉絲), “dong fen” (冬粉), “xi fen” (細粉), or “xian fen” (線粉), etc. They are noodles mainly made from starch and when cooked, have a translucent gray appearance that looks like cellophane.

[15\]](#) Though it is referred to in the Chinese original text as “mian pi” (麵皮) for “dough skin,” it is also commonly known as “liang pi” (涼皮) meaning “cold skin,” which was erroneously romanized as [rangpi](#). Similarly to the situation with [liangfen](#) (涼粉), I will be

using the pinyin for this dish.

Chapter 21: The Barbarians Have Carrots

In Sanshui County's county seat, on the north side of the street by the east gate of the city walls was a store bearing a sign with two words, 'Noteworthy House.'¹ This place was somewhat remote as there weren't many people passing by back and forth in front of the door.

It wasn't known where the shopkeeper on duty had gone to rest, leaving behind a single lowly sales clerk to stand guard by the counter as they gazed at the pedestrian occasionally passing by the door in boredom.

It was noon and the sales clerk had already heard his own stomach growling but with no one coming to replace him, he could only continue soldiering on here while frequently thinking of the food and wine in the restaurants. He felt more and more hunger until even the movement of that tree shadow outside seemed to slow down.

Placing both arms on top of the counter to cushion his chin, both of his eyes dully gazed at that small soup cake² shop as he muttered: "Having a bowl of soup cake is good, too, ~ah. This broken-down store—one day won't even see two people coming in."

Just as he was muttering, ~ne, two people actually entered the doorway. The sales clerk immediately removed his arms and with a sweeping glance, he could conclude that these two were people with money, clad in long silk robes and the string falling from the waist had a jade piece hanging from it. Going along with the

motion, it never stopped bouncing.

“What do these two respected customers wish to find? This little one will point it out for you [honorific].” Based on his own judgment, the sales clerk changed his expression into a face full of smiles as he respectfully inquired.

“Go busy yourself, we two will casually browse.” One of the people said, throwing over a small piece of silver with a wave of their hand.

The sales clerk hurriedly caught it, weighing it for a bit so he could estimate the approximate weight. It definitely was 3 qian [mace].³ Honored guest, ~ah! He felt his own body grow spirited and his stomach wasn’t even hungry anymore. With 3 qian [mace] of silver, when he got off work at night, he could go to that Apricot Spring House⁴ to eat a good meal and find a pretty little sister. Coming back here directly tomorrow would be fine.

Those two people only looked and didn’t speak, either. After going around in a circle, they suddenly locked onto a painting. Exchanging a glance before nodding at the same time, the person who had just given the money spoke up and said: “Sales Clerk, what painting is this?”

“Aiya~! Respected customer, your [honorific] eyes are real poisonous,⁵ ~ah! One look and you singled out the good in this painting. This painting was painted by a predecessor, an image of early spring’s water lilies.⁶ You [honorific] look at this brush stroke—hard but not broken, soft but not bewitching. Just a few

strokes and it has already...”

“Fine, fine. How much is this painting?” Not waiting for the sales clerk to finish speaking that continuous line of praises, this person was already impatiently waving his hands to interrupt the presentation and directly ask for the price.

The sales clerk was rather sensible. If the other person didn’t wish for him to speak, then he wouldn’t speak. Gazing at that painting, he calculated how much money he should ask for. If that painting had not a bit of damage, then asking for 20 silver taels would really be feasible. The problem was that painting obviously had a spot that had received burn damage from a fire.

In the upper right-hand corner of the painting, there was a fingernail-sized hole. It had already been filled in by the craftsmen using a special technique but it could still be seen. He temporarily didn’t know how to ask for money—too much, he was afraid the other party would directly leave; too little, he would then feel that the reward money he himself gained was too few as the more he sold, the more he got.

Just as he was wavering in his indecision, a voice rang out from behind him.

“Liu Wang,⁷ are you lazing about again? Don’t you see that an honored guest has visited and you’re not serving them well?”

Upon hearing this voice, the sales clerk Liu Wang was relieved at the shopkeeper’s appearance. Swiftly half-turning his body, he

said to the shopkeeper: “Uncle Zhao,⁸ these two have taken a liking to that painting on the wall and asked after the price but I’ve forgotten it.”

As the sales clerk spoke, he blinked his eyes.

Shopkeeper Zhao actually didn’t even need the sales clerk’s hint as he had already deduced from the attire of these two people that their net worth was not low. Glancing at the painting once, he smiled as he said: “Wonder how this honored guest is called?”

“Li.” That person who had first spoken replied one word and then didn’t speak anymore.

“So it’s Mister Li. For Mister to have taken a fancy to this painting, then you really have a discerning eye. According to this...”

“How much money?” Mister Li didn’t wait for Shopkeeper Zhao to finish speaking and directly asked for the price.

“200 taels—this painting is one painted by a Western Jin⁹ master. As time passed, the preservation wasn’t complete and there is a slight blemish on the painting. Therefore, this respected customer only needs 150 silver taels to take it away.”

Shopkeeper Zhao didn’t know how much he himself should ask for so he thought to first ask for a stratospheric asking price and wait for the other party’s counter. He was rather unafraid of them

not buying it if expensively priced but feared selling it cheaply and having them look down on it—there were always such types of people.

“150 taels? Fine, buy it.” Mister Li basically didn’t counter with any other price and directly agreed.

Shopkeeper Zhao started, even feeling some regret in his heart. If he knew that these two would be so easily dealt with, then he’d have asked for a bit more. At this moment though, there was no way to take it back. Just when he was about to walk over to take down the painting to wrap it up, that Mister Li spoke again.

“First, no hurry. We haven’t brought enough money today. Only have 50 taels. Count it as a deposit first. Coming back to get it after a few days. That good?”

Hearing this, Shopkeeper Zhao hastily nodded and agreed, thinking that was so. Who had nothing better to do than to go out carrying so much? It’d be too heavy. No fear with getting the 50 taels.

“I’ve heard that after others have given the deposit, a few stores will secretly switch out the items, substituting good for shoddy quality. Don’t know...?” Mister Li asked again.

Shopkeeper Zhao knew that he was uneasy here and immediately said: “Mister Li, rest assured. This store definitely wouldn’t do such a thing as that. If you still can’t set your mind at ease, you can find people from the brokerage to come here for a guarantee.

However... Seeking people for a guarantee will need a bit more in fees.”

“No problem. Go find them.” Mister Li made the call.

With this, Shopkeeper Zhao was even more reassured. He had been real worried that after a few days, the two people would seek out someone who knew the business to come here and ask for that money back. Even if they didn’t get it back, there would be some argument. Urging Liu Wang to go find people from the broker to come over, he prepared the tea drinks and refreshments on this side.

After a short while, Liu Wang brought the brokerage’s guarantor back here. The guarantor inquired about the price and requested 150 wen [cash] as a guarantee fee. Mister Li gave it without saying a second word.

Taking down the painting, they recorded some of the unique points on there to better serve as proof.

Mister Li especially used thin paper to trace that burn damaged area on the painting and even added a description of the surrounding scorch marks. He proposed coming back to fetch it half a month later. If by that time, it wasn’t this painting, the store would pay compensation in tenfold the amount of silver taels. After half a month, if he hadn’t arrived to get it, then for each late day, Mister Li would pay an extra 100 wen [cash] in money. If an entire month passed without it being taken, the deposit money would be given to the store.

Shopkeeper Zhao thought on it and seeing that there were even people from the brokers guaranteeing it, nodded and agreed. With both sides sealing it with their handprints and initialing it, a transaction deal was completed. Watching those two people walk into the distance, not only was Shopkeeper Zhao happy, Liu Wang had also received 5 qian [mace] in reward silver.

The sun gradually tilted; red clouds filled the sky, slightly curling, as birds flew overhead, the white feathers dancing.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both walked hand in hand to the banks of the river in front of the gates, the sun's reflection causing their two shadows to elongate.

Xiaohong nervously watched, afraid that the two little ancestors would, in a fit of joy, jump down. This type of thing could all possibly happen. Who made it so that her own Little Mister wasn't the same as other people, ~ne?

“Zhang Xiaobao, what do you say about funneling this water into a pond that's been dug out, can some ducks and geese be raised? Salted goose eggs and salted duck eggs¹⁰ are tastier than salted chicken eggs.” Wang Juan stood by the riverside, gazing at that crystalline water flow as well as the occasional flashes of fish silhouettes under the water's surface while she yearningly asked.

“Unh, I was also thinking on this. But right now, there's a shortage of staff. Most importantly is that my money isn't enough. Bear with it until the most recent affairs are up and running. If you

want to eat, first trade for it in the manor. Several days after Swindler Song has been put away, I'll have money."

Zhang Xiaobao had this type of calculation several days earlier. He had thought to ask his mother for money but after a moment of indecision, decided to earn it himself. These few days didn't make a difference.

"Little Mister, Little Miss, let's go to the back a bit. Absolutely mustn't fall down there." Xiaohong, feeling like this place was dangerous, spoke urgently from the side. The water wasn't deep but submerging two little children was easy.

"Don't be afraid. Juan-Juan and I can both swim. We're just looking at the water flow. A good mood—how beautiful is this day? When the matters on this side are done with, you'll be in charge of raising the ducks and geese and you can even grow lotuses.¹¹ Several more dishes are costly if constantly bought. If we can take care of it ourselves, then let's take care of it ourselves. A meal of rice is hard to come by, ~ah."

Zhang Xiaobao spoke while still retreating one step backward so he wouldn't make Xiaohong worry.

Xiaohong nodded her head in a daze, feeling that if these words of Little Mister's had come out of Mistress' mouth, then it would be a little easier for people to accept.

Just when the three of them were appreciating the scenery of the setting sun, the rosy evening clouds,¹² the flying birds, and the

flowing water, a person hurriedly ran over and upon seeing them, said to Wang Juan:

“Little Miss, this little one already knows where this object is being stored. According to that Swindler Song’s description, we discovered several boats in the Luo River and from the places where it occasionally peeped out, we saw that red and green object.”

As they spoke, this person took out a sheet of paper from within his chest. There was an object drawn on it. He had to find a person to draw it so had been delayed.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan looked over at the drawing and simultaneously said out loud: “Carrot.”¹³

“Good stuff. This time, there’s a new dish. Haven’t gotten to see this plaything over here before.” Zhang Xiaobao was happy.

Over there, Wang Juan was also vigorously nodding her head: “Unh, yeah, ~ya. This stuff shouldn’t be produced locally. Looks like it really was taken from the barbarians. I don’t even know what that Swindler Song is thinking? Looking at the situation, it seems that it’s (taking up) all of the boat. Then, could some in the middle that don’t lack moisture continue to be planted and live? Once we have the seeds, we can plant it ourselves. I like eating stir-fried carrot slices. You, ~ne?”

“I like eating it raw. There are also cucumbers, eggplants, and nappa cabbages.”¹⁴ I like eating them all, eating it raw, treating

them like fruit.” Zhang Xiaobao replied.

“Who would treat these things like fruit? Eating carrots raw isn’t good.” Wang Juan smiled as she spoke.

“Then, what to do? Who would have nothing to do and give orphanages fruit to eat? That group of people had barely managed to send over a little bit—they’d clearly spent CN¥100¹⁵ to buy it but insisted on saying that it was CN¥1,000. They did bring quite a few reporters from all over, terrified that other people wouldn’t know that they had donated stuff.”

Zhang Xiaobao said, curling his lips.

“So, it’s this way, ~ah. Then, you had a lot of hardship when you were small. People, ~ah, all wish to have a good reputation.” Wang Juan sighed once, feeling that Zhang Xiaobao’s childhood really was too pitiable.

But Zhang Xiaobao shook his head indifferently: “Actually, I’m very grateful to those people. No matter for what purpose they were acting, it was fine as long as the stuff was brought over. If there were people donating every day, I’d rather provide proof for them—even saying CN¥100 into 10,000 would be fine. It’d be better than not having anything at all.

The thing I’m happiest about is having fulfilled Director Grandpa’s dying wish. I even saved a child just before my death. It was worth it. Now, it’s good. There are carrots to eat from now on.”

“Zhang Xiaobao, please allow me to use solemn words to evaluate you. You are a good swindler.” Wang Juan said while blinking those big eyes of hers.

Notes:

[1\]](#) The store’s name is “Liu Yi Ju” (留意居), which has a bit of wordplay since “liu yi” (留意) can mean to keep someone’s notice but it can also mean to beware. It is also a rather literary name so translating it word for word would have resulted in a rather ridiculous sounding name (at least in my opinion), which is why I compromised and chose to translate it as “Noteworthy House” instead of “Attention-Keeping House.” The original Chinese describes the sign as having 3 characters but with the translation, this is no longer applicable.

[2\]](#) An early form of soup noodles that literally translates to “soup cake” (tang bing/湯餅), it was one of the foods imported from China into Japan that possibly became the basis for [udon](#) noodles.

[3\]](#) Qian/錢 is a [traditional Chinese measurement unit for mass](#) that was also used to weigh silver or gold currency, being one-tenth of a tael, which is around ~3.7 grams depending on the region and time period. It is transcribed as [mace](#) based on its [Malay](#) pronunciation but since mace can mean [something completely different](#) in English, I decided to use a combination of the pinyin with mace noted as an aside in text. Outside of this context, qian/錢 is the generic Chinese word for “money.”

[4\]](#) The Chinese name is “Xing Chun Lou” (杏春樓), which I have

translated as “Apricot Spring House.” Lou/樓 normally means “floor” but in this case, it’s short for “lou fang” (樓房) or “storied house.” The way you can tell this name is for an establishment related to the red-district is because the name mentions spring and uses fruit or flowers that are commonly used metaphors for feminine beauty to symbolize the euphemistic goods available for sale. Spring is a strong indicator of the nature of the business because aphrodisiacs are called “chun yao” (春藥) or “spring drugs” in Chinese and the season of spring is also the customary mating season for animals leading to a lot of spring-related word play in the various love or sex-related Chinese expressions. To the Chinese ear, the naming sense comes off as similar in tone to the way the titles of porn films sound.

5] Though saying someone’s eyes are poisonous can sometimes have the connotation of having a poisonous glare, it usually is a compliment stating that they have a discerning eye. I was unable to confirm how this idiom came about but my conjecture is that the Chinese word for poison (du/毒) is a homophone for the word for unique (du/獨) so someone with poisonous eyes not only has sharp eyes but can also spot the special unique qualities that might escape ordinary notice. By the way, sharp eyes is called “yan jian” (眼尖), which means “pointy eyes.”

6] “Shui lian” (睡蓮) is a type of water lily whose scientific name is *Nymphaea tetragona*. Though the Chinese name literally translates to “sleeping lotus,” it is not a lotus.

7] Liu Wang is surnamed Liu/劉 and his name of Wang/旺 means prosperous.

[8\]](#) Liu Wang calling the shopkeeper “Uncle Zhao” is likely out of respect for his older age though it is possible that they do have some blood relation. Since there is no generic word for uncle in Chinese, you can still discern some facts from the chosen terminology. Here, Liu Wang is using shu/[叔](#), which means father’s younger brother. When applied to non-relatives, that means the person being so addressed is younger than the speaker’s father but too old to be in the same generation as the speaker like a brother. Shu/[叔](#) is also another way for married women to address their husband’s younger brother though it is usually modified into “xiao shu zi” (小叔子) to differentiate. In addition, shu/[叔](#) was historically used as the name for the 3rd son in a noble family before the Chinese naming conventions loosened up.

[9\]](#) “Xi Jin” (西晉) or Western Jin is the earlier half of the [Jin dynasty](#), which was founded by the [Sima](#) (司馬) clan, with the later half called Eastern Jin or “Dong Jin” (東晉). When referencing the entire Jin dynasty, it is referred to as the “Two Jins” (Liang Jin/兩晉), which also differentiates it from a later dynasty that used the same character in its name, the [Later Jin dynasty](#) (Hou Jin/後晉).

[10\]](#) [Salted duck eggs](#) (xian ya dan/[鹹鴨蛋](#)) are a Chinese delicacy made by soaking duck eggs in brine. They are usually eaten with [congee](#) (rice porridge). The orange-red yolks can be used as an ingredient in [mooncakes](#) as well. Other eggs like chicken eggs can be prepared using the same method but the flavor is usually not as rich.

[11\]](#) Whenever lotuses (lian hua/[蓮花](#)) are mentioned in Chinese, it is specifically the [Nelumbo nucifera](#) that is being referenced. Outside of its symbolic nature as derived from Buddhism and the role it plays in Chinese folklore, it is also greatly valued for its

nutritional uses since every part of this flower is edible, making it a popular delicacy.

[12\]](#) I wanted to note that this part as a bit difficult for me to efficiently translate as the original Chinese uses just two characters, “wan xia” ([晚霞](#)). Roughly speaking, if translating as a word for word match, it would translate to “evening clouds.” However, the Chinese had various characters to represent the different types of observed clouds and xia/[霞](#) is the character specifically used for rosy clouds or the glow emanating from the sunset or sunrise.

[13\]](#) “Hu Luo Bo” ([胡蘿蔔](#)) means “carrot” in Chinese. This particular name is the same principle as the “hu deng” ([胡凳](#)) that I previously translated as a “Turkic stool” as “hu Luo Bo” ([胡蘿蔔](#)) literally translates to “Hu radish.” Another name for carrot in Chinese is “hong Luo Bo” ([紅蘿蔔](#)), which means “red radish.”

[14\]](#) “Bai Cai” ([白菜](#)) is usually transcribed in English as [Chinese cabbage](#), which itself is the general label for 2 kinds of vegetables: Brassica rapa pekinensis—more commonly known as [nappa cabbage](#)—and Brassica rapa chinensis or [bok choy](#). The reason for the confusion is because bok choy’s name in Cantonese is “bai cai” ([白菜](#)) but it is called “qing cai” ([青菜](#)) or “green vegetables” in Mandarin. Most often or not, “bai cai” ([白菜](#)) or “white vegetables” will be referring to nappa cabbages. Sometimes, it is referred to as “da bai cai” ([大白菜](#)) or “great white vegetables” to remove any confusion.

[15\]](#) Because [¥](#) is the currency symbol used for both the [Japanese yen](#) ([円/圓](#)) and the [Chinese yuan](#) ([元/圓](#)), I used CN¥ to denote that

it is [renmenbi](#) (RMB/人民幣) that Xiaobao is using here.

Chapter 22: Mutually Scheming Over A Contract Paper

Catching sight of the things, Zhang Xiaobao was reassured. Otherwise, he'd have to make a little less money. 2,000 dan [stone] of carrots, even if there was a bit of extra water,¹ that would still be 200,000 catties.

Zhang Xiaobao was a bit impressed by that Song Jing-gong. Where'd he go to get 200,000 catties of carrots, ~ne? For what purpose? Just what was he thinking when he was getting the carrots?

Could it be that he really wanted to do normal business? Not right, ~ya. If it really was like that, then he should've found people to have that store of his directly mortgaged. With a store worth 300 silver taels, mortgaging it for 200 taels would still be no problem.

Just when Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were unsure, that person who came as a messenger gave the both of them the answer.

“Little Mister Zhang, Little Miss, can this stuff be eaten? It's still not as big as our white radishes² here. It's being sold so expensively, too—people won't die from eating it, right?”

With this mention of his, Zhang Xiaobao understood. After all, carrots had never been seen by the people here. The price that he,

Song Jing-gong, imported it in at should be cheap with nothing more than a bit more in shipping costs. In the end, discovering that no one would buy it, he had prepared to get rid of the stuff or use it to swindle some money.

Usually, people didn't have that much spare money on their hands as the large majority was still trying to use the bartering method to settle accounts. Who would be willing to spend 2 wen [cash] in money to buy 1 catty of small white radishes? 2 catties of large white radishes are so heavy that for 1 wen [cash] money, people would rush to buy it.

"He's preparing to make a huge sum here, ~ah. His ambition really isn't little at all." Wang Juan had also thought of this point as she spoke up.

"He's only thinking of swindling but can't do management. Wait until we've taken in this 2,000 dan [stone] of carrots, I'll sell it at 3 wen [cash] money for 1 catty for you to see—and no need to swindle, either." Zhang Xiaobao smiled, revealing two dimples once again.

"Don't need you to; I can sell it, too. With just those methods, by switching their use, at least one of them would succeed. Next step is to see if he'll fall for it or not." Wang Juan also had plans this time, happily raising her head.

"Stop for a bit. I'll arrange the eggs and light the brazier. It'll get cold in a while."

On the road from Tuqiao Village to Xinping City, Yingtao instructed the person driving the carriage to first stop for a bit. After the carriage had stopped, she then adjusted the positions of those 200 chicken eggs in front of her a little and used the brazier to heat up the quilt to place on top.

Following her call, the carriage once again started leisurely moving forward. The coachman³ who had driven carriages for 30 years had brought out all of his expertise for these two days. Using the dim illumination of that lantern hanging in front of the carriage, the coachman could avoid any one of the small potholes.

Only until the horse could no longer walk did they stop, unhitching the horse to tether to a tree on the side to let the horse itself rest and graze for grass.

“Uncle⁴ Wang, the carriage driving you [honorific] have done here is really great. The chicken eggs weren’t rocked too much.” Yingtao reached out a hand under the quilt to feel the temperature. Releasing a breath, she took out water to drink a few sips and praised the coachman leaning against the tree.

“It’s nothing. Drove carriages for 30 something years so was already used to it. It’s not me just blindly telling you this but even without this lantern, I would still know where a pothole is in front.” The coachman opened a water bag as he spoke. Then, taking out from his person a small bag with some fried rice inside, he prepared to start eating.

Yingtao seeing this, hurriedly accepted the item handed over

from the two people who had been following after the carriage and placed it in front of the coachman as she said: “Uncle Wang, eat this. It was already prepared when coming here.”

With that light from the lantern, the coachman saw that in front of him was some well-sliced pig’s head meat⁵ as well as two fried cakes.⁶ His mouth splitting into a grin, he wasn’t polite, either. After accepting it, he wrapped the meat inside the cake and enthusiastically took a big bite. Squinting his eyes, he slowly swallowed it and then, drank another sip of water. His face writ full of life experience wrinkled together as he said:

“Savory, real savory. That manor of yours is better, ~ah. The Wang Family’s manor has to give quite a few taxes every year so it’s not as wealthy as yours there.”

“Uncle Wang, the aged⁷ you [honorific] shouldn’t speak in this way. Little Miss Juan-Juan is there. Just wait. It won’t even need two years before the people of our two manors can eat meat for every meal. Other meat, I don’t dare speak of but chicken meat—that’s however much you wish to eat, however much there will be.”

Yingtao gazed at the carriage compartment as she thought of those chicks about to hatch inside, her mood lightening a lot.

“Good, I’ll heed you. This old man,⁸ I will wait two years and will definitely eat that chicken meat for every meal. Chicks can be hatched out of those eggs of yours in the carriage?” The coachman was also full of hope as he spoke, then pointing at those chicken

eggs in the carriage, asking with some misgiving.

“Of course they can. I’ve seen the appearance of the chicks inside. Wait after a few days, the whole manor will be full of chicks running about.” Yingtao confidently said.

It was night, the dark clouds had still not dispersed, blanketing over the brilliance of the moon and stars.

Song Jing-gong lay down on the bed as he thought of his concerns. As he thought, he suddenly laughed and began to talk to himself as he said: “Watching me has what use? Could they assume that I will go get the stuff in these two days? Want to stake their claim midway through?⁹ I’m in no hurry. Just wait for a few days and get that money lent into my hands, I’ll let you all know the stuff on that boat.

Actually dare to raise the prices on me—a night’s sleep and eating a meal for one day asks for 50 wen [cash] of money out of me. Give it—I’ve given it all. By that time, let’s see who will cry. That stuff clearly can be eaten, why can’t it be sold?”

“Mister Song, Mister Song is awake, ~ne? The food and wine you [honorific] wanted has arrived.” Just as Song Jing-gong was plotting the course of the swindle this time, a door knocking sound and a voice raised in inquiry came from outside.

Song Jing-gong flipped over and lit the oil lamp. Opening the door, he saw that old man standing outside and some discomfort rose within his heart. For each meal, eating chicken eggs and stir-

fried garlic chives, garlic chives and stir-fried chicken eggs—if it were not for the shredded white radishes, he would have been a bit fed up with it.

Here, he'd had them prepare some good wine and good food for him today. But the result was 6 qian [mace] of silver was taken away. Just this little place was enough to go to a little shop and order a table of food. Seeing the three small plates on that sieving pan¹⁰ the old man was carrying as well as a jug of wine, however it was calculated, it wasn't worth 6 qian [mace] of silver.

“I've troubled Old Father. Bring it inside.” Song Jing-gong admonished himself not to be angry and that later on, he would get revenge before he could eke out a strained smile in greeting.

“No trouble, Mister Song. You [honorific] spent the money, this old man, I, went to buy it. Where's the bother? Tonight, I can't get to sleep, either.”

The old man entered the room while carrying the sieving pan and placed the three dishes and jug of wine on the small table. Then, giving Song Jing-gong a friendly smile, he turned around and left.

Song Jing-gong was also really hungry. Seeing that there were three dishes and not discovering whatever chicken eggs or whatever stir-fried things, he exhaled a long breath. He could actually eat meat.

Picking up the chopsticks, he found the largest chunk of the thing that should meat and picked it up to put in his mouth.

Chewing twice, his face instantly changed in expression. It was meat. Alas, it wasn't the lamb meat that he had imagined but fish meat. There were even bones, ~ne.

The meat chunks weren't that small. That was to say then that the fish was a large fish. But fish meat was inexpensive and it actually required 6 qian [mace] of silver from him?

The furiously mad Song Jing-gong reached toward the other dish with his chopsticks. Here, the meat was a bit smaller. When he had eaten it into his mouth, Song Jing-gong wasn't angered again but nodded his head as he murmured:

“Impressive. Before was the meat of a big fish; now, here is the meat of a small fish. Zhang Manor, I'll remember this.”

Finished muttering, Song Jing-gong then turned his gaze towards that dish with the meat that was not too small and not too large. He didn't need a taste and knew that this was a medium fish's meat. These not even completely three whole fishes, added up altogether wasn't even 10 wen [cash] in money. Calculating for labor, 20 wen [cash] was enough.

Appearing resigned, Song Jing-gong picked up that jar of wine and not even caring what taste it had, guzzled it down. Then, throwing away the chopsticks, he lay down on the bed, covered his head, and fell asleep.

It was like this for several days. Just as Song Jing-gong thought that he would still need to endure two more days, Steward Zhang

came by personally.

“Mister Song, the money has already been prepared satisfactorily. I don’t know if Mister still needs it or not?” Steward Zhang seemed to have arrived with some urgency. Entering the room, he hadn’t even caught his breath, ~ne, and was already speaking up in inquiry.

“Really? That really is great. Steward Zhang, you [honorific] here are helping me a lot. You [honorific], rest assured. After the matter is done with, I, Song Jing-gong, will definitely not forget you [honorific].”

Upon hearing the matter of the silver was possible, that despondent mood of Song Jing-gong’s immediately dispersed and scattered like the clouds and fog. Not waiting for Steward Zhang to speak, he said: “If so, then I’ll hand over my store’s property deed to you [honorific]?”

“No hurry, there are still some things in Mister Song’s store. It behooves us to go over and carefully look it over. The silver, I’ve ordered people to bring along. I don’t know if we can go today?”

Steward Zhang assuredly knew that saying all the words that should be said was necessary. Otherwise, it would be too easy to raise a person’s suspicions.

Song Jing-gong smiled as he nodded. This type of matter, he had already considered. At once, he went with Steward Zhang and the person holding the silver to Sanshui County.

It had reached the monkey hour [3~5PM]¹¹ in the afternoon before they had arrived outside the store. Looking inside and seeing that the person who normally kept watch out in back was actually standing at the counter there, Song Jing-gong's expression instantly became overcast as he walked up front to ask: "Storekeeper Zhao and Liu Wang, ~ne?"

"In reply to [Store] Owner's words, today at noon, there was someone who came into the store and took a fancy to a jar. They actually spent 30 silver taels to purchase it and even said it was inexpensive so insisted on inviting Storekeeper Zhao and Liu Wang to go have wine. So they went. How about I go and call them back? They just left." This person replied.

"No need. If they're eating, they're eating. You can go back, there's me to keep watch here. Steward Zhang, this business is busy, ~ah. Once I've gotten the borrowed money, I'll close the store. You [honorific] sent a person to watch it and wait till I've finished the turnover before talking.

In a while, deduct the money for that jar, I can directly compensate for it. Don't just look at how dearly it was sold for, that jar was actually only worth 160 wen [cash] and it was turned over like this?"

Song Jing-gong swept over the position where that jar was placed and discovering that it was less 100 something wen [cash] but did not heed it at all.

“Fine, then let’s invite the brokerage people to come over. I’ve prepared the silver already here.” Steward Zhang forthrightly assented. Behind him, the person carrying the silver put the money down and turned around to leave to go find the brokerage’s guarantor. Returning after not long, four people came this time. After all, there were a lot of items.

Checking the detailed records originally produced by the broker, all of the things were not wrong. Just as Song Jing-gong was about to sign the contract with Steward Zhang, Steward Zhang abruptly pointed at a painting and said:

“It’s better to record it with a bit more detail. That painting has a defect. If it’s wrong, it would be good to verify. Mister Song, let us first be petty men and later be gentlemen.¹² If it’s off, that would require paying threefold the money as we originally so agreed.”

Finished speaking and not even waiting for Song Jing-gong to have any response, he ordered people to record the defect on that painting, especially getting that burned area written down and having the brokerage people insure it.

Song Jing-gong felt like it was nothing. It was just a painting. When it was time, he’d just leave it to them. Smiling, he stood to the side as he watched. After the people who had come here had carefully given certificates for all of the other worthless items, with one hand handing over the money and one hand receiving the store was this completed.

When Steward Zhang and company had left, Song Jing-gong curled his lips and turned around to walk toward that Luo River.

He knew that there would definitely be someone following him.

Notes:

1] The Chinese used here is “shui fen” (水分), which literally means “water amount.” Shui/水 tends to be used as an euphemism for excess in metaphor for overestimation or dilution like saying an author blathers too much in order to pad out the word count, the forum thread has too much water as in off-topic talk, or their numbers have too much water, etc.

2] “Luo buo” (蘿蔔) means radish in Chinese. The full name is actually “bai lu buo” (白蘿蔔) or “white radishes” and is the winter version of the radish that would normally come to mind for most Westerners. The reason I have to footnote this to explain something that should be a straightforward translation is because white radishes are actually more better known in the West by the Japanese name, the daikon. Though daikon is likely the name that is most closely associated with this vegetable, it isn't completely identical to the Chinese variant so I chose to simply translate it as “white radish.”

3] “Ba shi” (把勢) translates to mean “expert, professional” in Chinese. So a “che ba shi” (車把勢) would be the equivalent of a professional driver of carriages or coaches.

4] “Bo” (伯) is a paternal uncle who is the speaker's father's older brother in Chinese. The formal term is “bo fu” (伯父) while the more casual form that is usually used by children is “bo bo” (伯伯). Obviously, if the speaker is calling an unrelated person this, then it is because the person is of the speaker's father's generation and not of the speaker's grandfather's generation while being older than

the speaker's father. Bo/伯 is also the traditional name for the second son of a noble family before Chinese naming conventions loosened up. The character bo/伯 can come up as well when used in the context of Chinese peerage titles and has a noble rank roughly equivalent to that of a count.

5] “Zhutou rou” (豬頭肉) is the meat that is sliced from a pig's head, which was considered a delicacy to eat, similar to bacon in the West.

6] The Chinese used is “you bing” (油餅), which is a Beijing food that is made in the exact same way that “you tiao” (油條) are made—it is just that “you bing” (油餅) are made in the form of cakes while “you tiao” (油條) are in the form of sticks. They are both dough fried in oil and are popular breakfast foods to eat with soy milk in Chinese cuisine. I didn't translate “you bing” (油餅) literally since “oil cake” can refer to the caked remains of what is left behind after oil is pressed from an oil-producing material. Thus, I translated “you bing” (油餅) as “fried cakes.” Just as a reference point that might be more familiar to readers, scallion pancakes are essentially a type of these but with scallions added into the dough.

7] Lao/老 simply means “old, aged” in Chinese but it can pop up in honorific speech because of the Confucian ideal of etiquette that respecting your elders as well as due to the conventional thinking that the elderly should be venerated for their wisdom and experience. Thus, sometimes to convey even more respect to a listener, a speaker will say that they are old or elderly even when they're not. It is not meant literally in these cases since at this point, it's almost become a compliment by rote. Sometimes though, a person being called old or elderly who actually isn't might jokingly reply that they're not that old in a wordplay on the

literal meaning.

8] “Lao Han” (老漢) basically just means “old man” in Chinese. Han/漢 became the ethnic label for the Chinese majority after the Han dynasty (漢朝) so calling an old man an “old Han” is similar to calling an elderly white man an “old Caucasian.”

9] “Heng cha yi gang zi” (橫插一槓子) literally translates to “horizontally plug in a thick stick” and is used to describe someone interrupting or cutting into something in an attempt to claim ownership or participation in something that they didn’t initiate or join in on from the start and are now attempting to do so midway through. In this case, Song Jing-gong is labeling the Zhang Family as trying to shove their way into the middle of a business deal that he started with the barbarians. I chose to translate for the meaning though I retained the image used in the original Chinese of a stake being stuck in the middle.

10] A “boji” (簸箕) can actually translate to dustpan. However these dustpans were also multi-purpose tools since they were baskets woven from reeds and depending on their design, could be used to sift or sieve stuff as well as to act as baskets or pans for temporary storage. Obviously, in this case, it is being used as a makeshift tray. This Baidu entry has pictures of boji/簸箕 for those who are curious. To try to avoid reader confusion, I opted to translate it alternatively as “sieving pan” in text.

11] I’ve translated “shen shi” (申時) as the monkey hour since it is the Earthly Branch assigned to the Monkey from the Chinese zodiac. The ancient Chinese divided the day into 12 2-hour segments or Earthly Branches with each named after an animal of

the Chinese zodiac as a mnemonic device. The monkey rules over the time span from 3:00~5:00 PM.

12] Steward Zhang's turn of phrase depends on understanding a key Confucian concept of Junzi (君子), which I have translated as "gentleman." Like "gongzi" (公子), the term that I have opted to translate as "Mister," junzi/君子 initially had a literal meaning of "lord's son" before it became a generic term that applied to all noble scions and then was co-opted by Confucianism to be more applicable universally. Similar to its Western counterpart, junzi/君子 is a moral archetype that Chinese men of good birth, background, or education tried to aspire to and some of the qualities associated with a junzi/君 was being gracious, humble, compassionate, and loyal. A junzi/君子 would be careful with their words and would accordingly, keep their promises when given. The opposite of a junzi/君子 was thus a xiaoren/小人 or a "petty man" who was the complete opposite. Thus, Steward Zhang saying "xian xiaoren hou junzi" (先小人後君子), which I have translated literally, is essentially asking for some precautionary measures. The request is practical but might come off as an insult to the honor of the person if they have pride in being a junzi/君. So Steward Zhang is asking for forgiveness and leeway for his caution while promising Song Jing-gong treatment as a junzi/君 or gentleman later on.

Chapter 23: The Sound Of Laughter While Strategizing In The Command Tent

The two banks were verdant with poplar leaves as dragonflies perched on the shallow grass. The skies were jade-blue with few floating clouds with the water reflecting blue with condensed dew. The gathering of swallows was perhaps intentional with the sound of the wind's arrival or stay. The wildflowers swayed following each swirl, a glimmer with each swing.

Early the following day, Song Jing-gong had just arrived at the Luo River riverbank. Gazing at the scenery before his eyes, he who should have been in a pleasant mood kept feeling like there was something off.

From Sanshui County to here, the day had been late yesterday and plus he had wanted to see whether or not there was a person following behind him so he randomly found an inn to stay in midway through. The result was it let him catch sight of that person who had been carrying the silver next to Steward Zhang.

He was confirming that there was someone following, only to discover that wasn't this person foolish, ~ya, and didn't even know how to tail someone? Other people would all try their best to keep a certain distance from the person being tailed. This person sure was good—trailing him only 20 steps behind.

Every time he stopped to turn his head around and look, you would typically have to hide. This person sure was good and just looked straightforwardly in front with their eyes, feigning an appearance of not being acquainted. Could it be that he was being

considered a fool—it had only been a while and he couldn't remember a person?

The most maddening wasn't even this. He himself had already found an inn. Adjacent to this inn was another inn so if you're tailing me, then you should go to stay in that inn.

Ending up staying in a single inn might be fine but he himself was dining in the lobby and the spots near the window only had two tables yet each one seated a person with one facing the other—spitting at the person in front wouldn't hit amiss. This was only because of the few people and the many empty tables. Otherwise, wouldn't they be sitting together to eat?

How was this tailing? It was clearly surveillance. Wonder what that Steward Zhang intended—could it be that he wished to drop the facade?¹

Song Jing-gong stood on the riverbank not too distant from the docks as he thought on exactly how he got like this. Why was he in such a perturbed mood—because of that person tailing him? Steward Zhang's attitude? The grievances he suffered at the two Zhang and Wang Manors? It didn't seem like it at all.

After thinking on it for a while, Song Jing-gong attributed this sentiment to the action this time being rather big and the cheating of people more formidable so that he would have such a feeling.

Turning his head to glance at that person who was squatting at a distance of around 10 steps away, they were currently fiddling with

the grass on the ground. From this distance, a team of ants could be seen hauling things in a black mass by that person's feet so that person was using grass to poke at the ants.

Song Jing-gong exhaled a long sigh. He really wanted to go over and ask that person, how old are you?

How could this kind of person be sent out to do things?

Shaking his head, Song Jing-gong didn't wish to expend his mental energy on such a fool type of person. It was better to first check on those things that had been transported back here from the barbarian lands that couldn't be sold.

Thinking of it, Song Jing-gong strode towards the docks. The boats that he had hired were still moored there, ~ne. Of course, these boats didn't have any other shipping fees. As a swindler, he wouldn't do anything like paying a shipping fee but had an agreement with that person from the barbarian clan. When the stuff was ferried here, out of the profit made, 21 would be added into 5.

When Song Jing-gong had arrived at the docks, that boat already had people who had recognized him as they hurriedly ran over to ask respectfully: "Greetings, Great Scholar Song.² You [honorific] have found someone to buy the sweet plants³ here? That's great. We've spent quite a bit of money just eating these past few days. If we can't sell them, then we would lose everything."

The attitude was respectful yet the words within carried a sense

of complaint. Song Jing-gong also knew that if switched with anyone else, they would also be unhappy.

“Unh, almost. Songri Nigan, ~ne? Have him sought out. I have important matters to discuss.”

This person that Song Jing-gong was speaking of was a petty chieftain of noble rank in the barbarian clans over there. They’d had a lot of contact with this side and so, took on some of the habits over here.

When the greeting person heard Song Jing-gong ask after their chieftain, their face unwittingly revealed a trace of happiness in their appearance though they continued to respectfully reply: “Great Scholar Song, my king found a method to get rich and has already left this place. The return may perhaps be after 2 days.”

“Get rich? He can also get rich? Good, ~ah. Wonder how is he getting it? Where would the riches be?” Song Jing-gong smiled. These barbarians also wanted to get rich coming to this place—keep dreaming, ~ne.

That person, seeing that Song Jing-gong’s tone had disdain, felt a little bit of dissatisfaction in his heart but still maintaining a smiling face in an appearance of welcome, continued and said: “My king really did find a way to get rich and even said to wait until after you [honorific] had arrived here to have you [honorific] go over to see.”

Seeing them speak with such assurance, Song Jing-gong was also

puzzled. Could it be that Songri Nigan really did step into a dog poop windfall⁴ and discovered something? But then feeling that it wasn't possible, so he asked: "How did Songri Nigan discover it? And where does he want me to go?"

"It was that someone came over to ask if we were buying chicks and said they could be cheaply sold. 2 wen [cash] can buy 1 chick—the kind that can grow up and lay eggs." That person replied.

Here now, Song Jing-gong wasn't puzzled but stupefied. A single chicken was worth around 30-some wen [cash] over here. It wasn't too expensive but hens were not the same. They could lay eggs and no matter how cheap, chicken eggs were still worth 1 wen [cash]. It didn't need too many days for the chicks to grow up and lay eggs—just half a year's time was more than enough.

This 2 wen [cash] bought a little one and a half year of casually feeding them a bit of stuff was only a few wen [cash]. Letting it outside to range for food to eat on its own would save even more. After half a year, wouldn't that money come in like an unending stream?

This price really was too cheap. When those hens brooded, laying eggs wasn't possible. With the delay of those few days, the money for the chicken eggs laid were all several wen [cash], how could it be so cheap?

'Swindler. I can't believe that I, Song Jing-gong, could also encounter a swindler.' Song Jing-gong's most instinctive thought was this. But he didn't know how the other side was doing the swindling. They were even selling chicks and not chicken eggs—

there, male or female could be figured out with one look.

“Fine, I’ll go over now. Find a person to lead the way in front.” Song Jing-gong really couldn’t figure it out and wanted to get a personal look. So taking his leave and then glancing over at that fool of a tracker, he was led away from the docks by someone to hurry towards that place selling the chickens.

The sparrow birds chirruped as the butterflies chased; hazy mists wreathed the green mountains in the distance as the oblique light dotted the floating dust motes by them.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan had just gotten up for the morning and had milk. They didn’t resume sleeping and went to the vegetable garden within the courtyard together, prepared to continue producing different dishes⁵ for the adults to eat. For the two of them, drinking some soup and swallowing some froth would be fine.

“No kidney beans,⁶ ~ah? I had wanted to simmer⁷ some to eat, ~ne.” Wang Juan looked around in a circle and didn’t discover kidney beans but did see that there were cowpeas.⁸

Meanwhile, Zhang Xiaobao, almost like a thief, struggled to pick a little round eggplant that was around 2 cun [inch] in diameter from within the eggplant plot. Using that thumb to vigorously dig at it until he dug out a small piece and shoved it in his mouth, he happily nodded his head.

“Xiaobao, what are you doing, ~ne? It’s not suitable for you to eat eggplants right now and to even be so surreptitious about it.” Wang Juan said upon seeing with a glance that Zhang Xiaobao was over there sneaking a bite, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

“I’m scared of other people finding out. The eggplants are too small. Eating it like this is a pity but it’s only at this time that the eggplants are sweetest. You try it.”

Zhang Xiaobao spoke while he dug out a little bit again and presented it in front of Wang Juan.

Wang Juan really didn’t know what to say. Such a grown man who was actually doing these kinds of stuff that only children would do. Reaching out a hand to slap down that small broken-off piece: “Can’t you focus on some serious business?”

“Then, forget it. Xiaohong, you eat it. It sure is sweet. After eating it, help us pick eggplants. We’ll be eating these for lunch today.” Zhang Xiaobao easily conceded to the beneficial advice⁹ and gave the small eggplant ‘eggs’ to Xiaohong.

Xiaohong took them and actually ate them. She didn’t have anything to eat getting up this morning so to be able to eat some eggplants was good.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, seeing that Xiaohong ate the eggplant with just a few bites, started. Only after a while did Wang Juan say: “Xiaohong, you rest assured. After Xiaobao and I make money over these next few days, the people who work the most in

the manor will definitely be able to have 4 meals a day in the future—morning, midday, and night as well as a midnight meal.”

“Thank you, Little Miss Juan-Juan. Actually, we’re all used to it. Don’t mention 4 meals, 3 meals would need to spend quite a bit extra in money.” Xiaohong’s eyes brightened but then she felt like this matter wasn’t possible. Which manor would give servants 4 meals?

Wang Juan also know that Xiaohong wouldn’t believe it until she’d really eaten 4 meals so she didn’t speak any more words as she pulled Zhang Xiaobao along to go look at the other vegetables. Here, there was Xiaohong to pick the eggplants.

“Actually, just 4 meals aren’t enough. These people, they keep exerting themselves over the day and in the middle of the night, they still have to appear when called. Have to prepare some fruits later on and supplement their nutrition to be enough. The sheep’s wool grows on the sheep’s body.¹⁰ The better their bodies are, the more things that they can do.”

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan arrived at a small plot of scallions, speaking as they squatted there. It was enough for a typical person to eat 3 meals in 1 day. Those servants were really too exhausted and also, it was entire families one after the other living at the manor.

Without the children, the parents would be aggrieved; without the parents, the children would be upset. A stable solidarity was the most important. If the nutrition kept up, people’s life expectancy would also lengthen. Once he and Wang Juan grew up,

the next generation of the manor would also appear. A manor also needed a manor's culture to do well.

“Unh, let's not hurry first. I'll arrange it at that time. You'll be responsible for the planning and I'll be responsible for the organization. In the future, if the footmen and guards increase, give them to me to drill. While I'm still little, I'm prepared to go find some of the data on this time period's military operations to integrate theory with practice to produce combat tactics.”

Wang Juan also supported this point and also wanted to use some of what she had previously studied. Seeing the nervous gaze Zhang Xiaobao was directing over here, she smiled: “Relax, I'm not rebelling so it won't implicate your Zhang Family. What dishes are you prepared to make for lunch?”

“Eggplant to be roasted together with fish—dress it with scallions and sauce after steaming, garlic eggplant, minced meat eggplant, dry stir-fried¹¹ eggplant—this will need to use that mountain chili sprout water, sugar-glazed¹² eggplant, red-cooked¹³ ribs and starched¹⁴ eggplant, rappi¹⁵ and simmered eggplant—peas will need to be added, 8 will be enough. Add an eggplant with kelp and shrimp soup. The staple food will be fried eggplant cakes.”¹⁶

Zhang Xiaobao counted on those little fingers of his as he listed them off one by one for Wang Juan to hear. After hearing it, Wang Juan solemnly nodded her head: “Fine. I think this matter's fine. I'm ready to eat tofu tonight. I'll have to depend on you—it has to be a feast of entirely tofu.”

“No problem. I resolve to complete the mission. My only worry is whether using brown sugar¹⁷ to make the sugar-glazed eggplants would make it hard to eat. On our return, get some charcoal and filter out the brown sugar dregs to be convenient for cooking in the future.”

If Wang Juan spoke, Zhang Xiaobao dared to promise it, seeming to be eager to try it, rendering Wang Juan speechless.

“All right. Whatever we eat is fine. Do you think that Swindler Song will act according to how you think he will act?” Wang Juan redirected the topic back to the right track.

“Relax, I understand the kind of person he is—it’s the same mentality as when I first started swindling.” Zhang Xiaobao nonchalantly said.

Notes:

^{1]} “Si po lian” (撕破臉) literally means to “tear apart face” and is used in situations where “face” or keeping up appearances was the only thing maintaining the peace of a broken relationship or situation. Thus, when even that semblance is dropped, hostilities break out. So I chose to translate this idiom as “dropping the facade.”

^{2]} This title is one formed by combining Song’s surname with great (da/大) and “cai zi” (才子), meaning scholar.

3] “Gan xun” ([甘荀](#)) is an alternative name for carrot that literally means “sweet plant,” which makes sense since the ‘barbarians’ wouldn’t call carrots the equivalent of “barbarian radishes” (huluobo/胡蘿蔔) the way that the Chinese do.

4] This Chinese idiom, “gou shi yun” ([狗屎運](#)), literally means “dog shit luck” and is used to describe a sudden windfall like someone happening across a quarter on the street. The fortuitous nature of happening across dog poop doesn’t make sense to modern eyes since it is now considered a sign of bad luck until you consider that there weren’t many sources of fertilization for agricultural use in the ancient world so fecal matter was a valued fertilizer source. Thus, accidentally stepping in dog shit would be considered lucky because you could sell it off for money to those in need of fertilizer or use it in your own fields if you were a peasant farmer. It is a very earthy idiom as expected of its agrarian roots so I have translated it as “dog poop windfall.”

5] “Hua yang” ([花樣](#)) literally translates to “flower semblance” and can have a number of different meanings in Chinese. It can literally refer to a flower’s appearance. Pattern or design is also another possible translation choice for this word. It can also mean tricks or techniques that dazzle the eye with their finesse (i.e. the magician pulled a trick by turning a bunch of ribbons into doves). It can also refer to the various ways of making and reproducing things including the different variations, similar to the different species of blooming flowers. Because I found it hard to literally translate this word, I had to opt for a rough translation in this case.

6] “Yun dou” ([芸豆](#)) is also called “cai dou” ([菜豆](#)) in Chinese but both names refer to the [kidney bean](#). A traditional dish from

[Beijing cuisine](#) using kidney beans is “[yun dou juan](#)” ([芸豆卷](#)), which Baidu seems to have translated as “French bean rolls.”

7] To [dun](#)/[燉](#) something is to gradually simmer a dish in cold water with seasonings until it comes to a prolonged boil. An alternate translation might be to “slow-cook.” This cooking technique is also called [double steaming](#) in English. Dun/燉 can refer to stewing in Western cuisine as well as the brewing of [traditional Chinese medicine](#), too.

8] “Jiang dou” ([豇豆](#)) is the Chinese name for [cowpeas](#). They can also be called “hu dou” ([胡豆](#)).

9] “Cong shan ru liu” ([從善如流](#)) is a 4-character couplet that describes someone following advice given to them for their benefit. In this case, Xiaobao is heeding Juan-Juan’s instructions to not eat eggplants that are not suitable for him to eat at his current physical age.

10] “Yang mao chu zai yang shen shang” ([羊毛出在羊身上](#)) is a Chinese expression that describes someone receiving a benefit or advantage that is, in actuality, something that they had already paid for with previous labor or money spent. This could be used to describe a person receiving a gift from someone that they are monetarily supporting—it is something paid for with their own money even if it is being returned through an indirect means. In this case, Xiaobao is referring to how feeding the servants 4 meals might seem like an extra expense but it will all return to them as a benefit anyway in the amount of labor that the servants pay them back with.

[11](#)] “Gan bian” ([乾煸](#)) is also known as “bian chao” ([煸炒](#)) or “gan chao” ([乾炒](#)) in Chinese and is [a form of stir-frying](#) called “dry stir-fry” that involves stir-frying with very small amounts of liquid.

[12](#)] “Ba si” ([拔絲](#)) literally translates to “pull strand,” which refers to wire extraction when used in the context of metalworking. However, it also describes a cooking technique where the food item is glazed in sugar to the point that the congealed syrup can be pulled out in strands—hence, the name. Examples of such dishes in Chinese cuisine are “ba si di gui” ([拔絲地瓜](#)) or candied sweet potatoes as an example of [Shandong cuisine](#), “ba si xiang jiao” ([拔絲香蕉](#)) or glazed bananas as another example of Shandong cuisine, “ba si shan yao” ([拔絲山藥](#)) or glazed [Chinese yams](#) as an example of [Beijing cuisine](#), etc.

[13](#)] “Hong shao” ([紅燒](#)) is a form of braising that is translated as [red-cooking](#) in English after the color of the meat ([紅燒肉](#)) that is cooked in such a way. It usually involves stewing or braising the food in soy sauce, Chinese rice wine, and caramelized sugar. Meat makes up a large majority of this type of cooking and these dishes are popular throughout broad swathes of China.

[14](#)] Hui/煨 is a [Chinese cooking technique](#) that refers to thickening the dish with starch after it has been quickly scalded and then stir-fried.

[15](#)] “You cai” ([油菜](#)) literally means “oil vegetable” in Chinese, which makes sense if you know that one of the largest sources of [vegetable oils](#) in the world comes from a specific cultivar of [rapeseed](#) known as [canola](#) (CANadian + Oil + Low + Acid). Other than the vegetable oil it can produce, rapeseed can also be edible as

vegetable greens. Though the “rape” in this plant’s name has a different etymological root (Latin word for turnip) than the other possible meaning, I opted to translate it as rappi to avoid reader confusion.

[16\]](#) “Zha jie he” ([炸茄盒](#)) literally translates to “fried eggplant box” but since they are fried cakes that are an example of [Zhejiang cuisine](#), I chose to translate them as “fried eggplant cakes.”

[17\]](#) “Hong tang” ([紅糖](#)) or “red sugar” is actually the Chinese name for [brown sugar](#).

Chapter 24: The Hatching Chicks Show Their Heads

The distance from Luo River to Little Ox Manor outside of Xinping City was not near at all. For the sake of figuring out the reason earlier, Song Jing-gong couldn't avoid boarding a horse carriage to be jolted along the way. When it had nearly reached noon, he could only climb down from within the carriage as if about to fall apart.

Bearing a pale white complexion, he turned his head—that fool of a stalker had actually gotten a hold of a horse carriage, too. Song Jing-gong completely understood now. They weren't following him but monitoring him, afraid that he would run.

Song Jing-gong already had no time to care much as he, along with that person guiding him, quickened their footsteps to walk toward Little Ox Manor. Twisting left and turning right, after around a quarter-hour, that person stopped in front of a very tiny courtyard.

In the middle of a fence made out of tree branches that was half as high as a man's height was a small wooden door and it hadn't been locked. With a blow of the wind, it swayed in and out. Within the courtyard stood a person that Song Jing-gong had seen before that previously stood by Songri Nigan's side. Since he was here, Songri Nigan was certainly in the room.

“If there really is a chick in this egg, when I return, I'll buy 10,000 of them.” Song Jing-gong hadn't even stepped a foot inside and he could hear the familiar sound of Songri Nigan's voice from

within the room. From the words, he knew that those chicks hadn't hatched yet. If so, it was even more evident that these chicks were a scam.

Feeling grounded in confidence, Song Jing-gong tidied his clothing, smiling as he walked inside. Upon entering the door, he directly said: "Whoever's selling chicks at 2 wen [cash] for each one—however much, I'll buy that much."

After coming to a standstill, he saw an old man, two young men, and a woman facing Songri Nigan. The woman's face was hidden by half of a piece of cloth. From those areas that were slightly revealed, a green birthmark could be seen. No wonder she had to cover it.

The two young men stood while the old man sat on top of an object that he didn't know what it should be called. That thing took up a portion of the entire room with the other end adjoining the wall.

"Great Scholar Song, you've also arrived here. That's good. Look here. This is called kang [bed-stove]. It's a place that they specifically designed to substitute for a hen's brooding nest. This woman said that with another 2 or 3 days, there would be chicks coming out of the eggs. I'm preparing to stay here and wait until the chicks come out. At that time, I'll buy up 10,000 to bring back to raise."

Upon seeing the person entering from outside, a burly-figured man in the room used a stiffly accented voice to speak. This person was Songri Nigan, a barbarian.

Song Jing-gong smiled as he replied: “Songri Nigan, how can you also trust this kind of thing? If using this thing called whatever kang [bed-stove] could help hens brood, then wouldn’t that mean that from now on, it’ll be fine as long as hens lay eggs? Go, go back to sort out our cargo.”

Songri Nigan, hearing Song Jing-gong’s words, shook his head as he persisted: “No, I have to see if this really can produce chicks. On top of the kang [bed-stove] are 200 of them. I’ve already given the down payment. By then, if there are no chicks coming out, they’ll pay me back tenfold. Wait 2 days and we can know.”

Song Jing-gong gazed at the top of the kang [bed-stove]. A mat was laid on top. He thought underneath were the chicken eggs. ‘Could it be that they really can be hatched?’

Before when Song Jing-gong was entering the courtyard, he had already seen that there were chickens being raised within the courtyard. If they really could use such a method to hatch chicks, then wouldn’t it be that making more of these kinds of kang [bed-stove] and going elsewhere to buy chicken eggs and it would succeed? 1 chick for 2 wen [cash] was really too cheap. If they were sold for 3 wen [cash], there would still be people rushing to buy them. It really was getting rich.

Considering it for a while, Song Jing-gong said to that old man: “Old Father, can you allow me to also check out these chicken eggs?”

The old man glanced at Song Jing-gong, then looked at that woman and said: “Have to ask my daughter-in-law on this matter. These eggs are all her work.”

Song Jing-gong followed the old man’s gaze to once again look at that woman. The woman was rather agreeable, nodding and then walking by the kang [bed-stove] to reach out a hand to gently lift the matting. Neatly lined up inside was, as expected, quite a few chicken eggs.

“Songri Nigan, since you want to see, then I’ll accompany you for 2 days.” As a thought flashed through his mind, Song Jing-gong also wanted to stay to keep him company.

As for a place to live, it was also simple. Now that the weather was hot, just having a place to stay was good. Meals were eaten in this house. If some money for food was given, this family would likely not reject it. For these past few days, Song Jing-gong had eaten such bitter hardships that he had grown accustomed to the taste.¹ So there was no loss in enduring for 2 days. He wanted to see whether this household actually could produce chicks.

The old man didn’t refuse. Not only did he promise to make food for Song Jing-gong and company to eat, he even promised to empty out a room for them to stay in. The money he asked for wasn’t that much—6 wen [cash] for 1 day per person. There were only some vegetables so if they wanted to eat meat, they could buy it themselves, and the old man could make it.

At once, the three of them prepared to stay. Song Jing-gong thought of the person doing surveillance on him. When he went to

the doorway to look outside, as expected, that person hadn't left and was just standing outside the courtyard, their gaze firmly fixed on the door here.

Seeing this, Song Jing-gong wasn't angry. If they were willing to stay, then stay. He took out some money to give to the old man and get him to go buy some vegetables and wine; he would eat here for lunch.

“Don't slice it with the skin. First peel the skin. Slice it. Fry it.² Continue.”

In Tuqiao Village, within the back kitchens of Zhang Manor, Zhang Xiaobao was directing the two people dedicated to cooking who were occupied there. If it wasn't for Zhang Xiaobao feeling that he wasn't able to pick up that kitchen knife, he wouldn't even need other people to make it. He trusted that his own skills would be even better.

“Fine, ~ah. Xiaobao, your level as an armchair general³ here isn't low, ~ya—speaking with reason and eloquence.” Seeing that Zhang Xiaobao was so busy that it could be called a mess, ~ah, Wang Juan was ‘genuinely praising’ him to the side.

“I feel that these words shouldn't be coming out of your mouth, General Wang who has studied command. Do the people studying command at the military academies all charge especially to the very front while holding guns to line the soldiers up into battle formations? I'm a little worried now. If we really find some people to let you teach battle tactics to, the biggest possibility would be

that the general wouldn't be commanding from the rear but charging on horseback while relaying orders to the troops."

Zhang Xiaobao did not care one bit; while directing others on how to make the dishes, he even had the time to use lip speech for a rebuttal.

"That's right. Once you mentioned it, I thought of it. Here, there is no field intelligence display system. I don't even have a map. The distribution of firepower isn't the same, either. I still need to reconsider it from scratch.

If that's so, the research that's most needed is on the combat matters of individual soldiers or teams. We must have powerful long-range striking capabilities to be able to effectively penetrate and surround [the enemy]. Comrade Xiaobao, can you draw maps?"

Wang Juan unexpectedly didn't refute it, nodding as she admitted to her own shortcomings.

"Don't know—how would I learn this stuff?" According to his many years of experience swindling, Zhang Xiaobao felt a little uneasy right now.

"Really don't know? You forgot to study it back then? Confine you a few more times and maybe you'd know how. It's nothing even if you don't know how. I'll teach you; I know how."

Wang Juan stuck her face close up to Zhang Xiaobao as she spoke threateningly.

“It’s fine. Don’t wait till the oil has boiled to add the sugar, otherwise it’ll burn. Put in the eggplant. All right. The last dish has been finished. Prepare cool water. Withdraw.”

Zhang Xiaobao selectively forgot about Wang Juan’s existence, turning around to leave after instructing a final sentence. When passing over the door threshold,⁴ he who was usually alert was even tripped up for a bit and nearly fell down. It was good that Wang Juan gave him a hand.

“See, this is the end result of not being familiar with the terrain.” Wang Juan said with all smiles as she grabbed onto Zhang Xiaobao.

Lunch could be said to be sumptuous to the extreme with eight dishes, one soup, as well as a staple food.

When everything had been served, all four of the adults, save for Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao, were dumbfounded. It wasn’t because everything had eggplants that they were dumbfounded but because they didn’t know how Xiaobao used eggplants to make so many different types of things.

“Eat, Mom. You [honorific] eat; Wang Juan and I can eat by ourselves. Other than the fried eggplant cakes and that dried stir-fried eggplant not being easy to eat, the rest are fine.”

Zhang Xiaobao directly used a hand to pick up an eggplant cake to place in his mother's plate, recommending the dish.⁵

Mrs. Zhang-Wang looked at this one table of eggplants and nodding her head, she praised: "My son is impressive. Which family's child can have eggplants made into such a feast for the eyes?"⁶

Zhang Xiaobao's grandfather and grandmother also smiled while approving of Mrs. Zhang-Wang's words. The result was that the four adults along with two children ate more than half of this one table of food.

Upon seeing that there were leftovers, Zhang Xiaobao regretted it then. He couldn't bear wasting stuff—it was fear of starving from those several years of wandering around.

"Simmer it all together for the night, we two will eat it." Wang Juan rather understood Zhang Xiaobao, signaling from the side.

"Never mind. I'll be more mindful in the future to try my best not to be wasteful. Deal with it like in the past." Zhang Xiaobao helplessly replied.

Under the previous approach, that was to throw away these dishes to feed the pigs. Some of them would be eaten by the servants but this was something that Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan didn't wish to see. Servants were people, too.

“The two of us can both eat this kind of thing. It’s better than during our previous trainings.” Wang Juan continued urging.

“I know. I previously avoided arrest by escaping deep into the mountains. I even used grass roots and tree bark to satisfy my hunger but who would let us eat like that?” Zhang Xiaobao didn’t wish to think too much as he stood up and greeted each relative before he walked out.

Two day’s time wasn’t long if it was said to be long and wasn’t short if said to be short. On top of the kang [bed-stove] within that room in Little Ox Manor, when the first chick broke itself out of its eggshell to wetly clamber out, however long the wait was, it could be considered acceptable.

Song Jing-gong almost couldn’t believe his own eyes. They really could use this thing called kang [bed-stove] to substitute for the hen brooding the nest. At once, the chick turned into a golden chicken in his eyes. A chick being worth however many wen [cash], he didn’t care about. He cared about that method that could hatch chicks.

He understood that this process wasn’t as simple as what his eyes saw. There must be a knack to it. Imagining the days of having large amounts of money, when Song Jing-gong looked at the birthmark on that woman’s face, he felt that this woman had such a special kind of beauty.

Songri Nigan also dazedly watched as the chick’s body slowly dried. Even if only 200 came out from these chicks in total, he was still happy. It looked like there was hope for 10,000 chicks.

Just as several of the people were surrounding the chick to look, the sound of people speaking could be heard from outside.

“It’s this house? They can use a thing called kang [bed-stove] to stand in for a hen brooding?”

“Owner, you [honorific] have spoken correctly. It’s here.” The voice of an individual that was probably a servant rose in reply.

Song Jing-gong started and then immediately reacted as he said to that old man sitting there who was still bearing a serene look: “Old Father, you [honorific] must definitely not divulge this matter. I’ll give you [honorific] money.”

“This isn’t good. Great Scholar Song, all who enter are guests. You~, the second chick has come out.” The old man narrowed his eyes and after saying a sentence in reply to Song Jing-gong, the head of a chick popped out of those eggs on top of the kang [bed-stove] again.

Notes:

[1\]](#) There is a bit of wordplay here as “chi ku” (吃苦), which literally means “eat bitterness,” is usually translated as “enduring hardship” and Song Jing-gong says that he had grown used to the hardship so that he has grown used to eating it—the bitterness that is, (chi xi guan/吃習慣) making a slight joke out of the situation.

[2](#)] “Guo you” (過油) literally means “over oil” and describes a process where the prepared ingredients are quickly fried in boiling oil in order to try to enhance the food’s flavor so it’s not meant to be a simple frying. However, because Xiaobao’s instructions are very monosyllabic and brief in the original Chinese, it explains my translation choice.

[3](#)] This 4-character couplet, “zhi shang tan bing” (紙上談兵) [Baidu], literally translates to “speaking of troops on paper” and describes someone knowing how to talk the talk but not necessarily how to walk the walk. In other words, someone who is knowledgeable about theory but who may not be good at putting it into practice. The source of this proverb is from the 81st biography chapter of the Records of the Grand Historian (Taishi Gongshu/太史公書) AKA the Scribe’s Records (Shiji/史記) by Sima Qian (司馬遷), which are the biographies of Lian Po (廉頗) and Lin Xiangru (藺相如). The “armchair general” of the story is Zhao Kuo (趙括) from the State of Zhao during the Warring States period, who was the son of a famous general named Zhao She (趙奢). Zhao Kuo had been known to love discussing battle strategy and tactics since childhood; the fact that no one could win a debate on military theory or tactical game against him made him very arrogant—a personality trait that his father found worrisome. During the Battle of Changping (長平之戰), Zhao Kuo was sent to replace the commanding general, Lian Po, after years of stalemate. Instead of keeping to Lian Po’s existing strategy that chose a cautious approach, Zhao Kuo threw it out in exchange for an all out assault, thinking he knew better. However, he was unable to adapt or apply his theoretical knowledge in practice when needed so he wasn’t able to adjust his tactics or respond in time to avoid defeat. He ended up dying in that battle. Thus, this proverb is a distillation of Zhao Kuo’s father voiced worry and criticism of him as recorded in the Scribe’s Records.

4] The threshold of a doorway in Chinese culture, “a men kan” (門檻), was a horizontal board made out of materials such as wood, stone, or metal that was like an elevated ledge or sill for the door. They were high enough that passing through a doorway required a person to step over them, leading to a higher chance of tripping over them if not careful than with door thresholds of European houses. To see some examples, visit the Baidu page [here](#).

5] “Quan cai” (勸菜), meaning “persuade dish,” is the Chinese dining custom where one will recommend one of the dishes being served to another one. The extent to which this urging is done can vary from a simple verbal suggestion out of politeness to direct action where a portion of the dish is placed in the bowl or plate of the person to whom the dish is being recommended to. In Chinese dining etiquette, the latter action is very rude and presumptuous if the people involved are not close enough such as mere acquaintances and guests versus family members or intimate friends. This practice normally comes up as a way to show filial piety with children picking dishes that are the parent’s favorite or vice versa to show parental love.

6] The Chinese expression used here is “lin lang man mu” (琳琅滿目), which literally means “lin lang full eyes.” “Lin lang” (琳琅) describes a beautiful jade. So this phrase is usually either used literally to describe actual gems and riches or metaphorically to illustrate the visual variety.

Chapter 25: Forcibly Raise Money To Sell To You

“There really are chicks coming out.” Following that voice, six people stood in the doorway. One of them was a person with a protruding belly, with a perpetual smile on his face. The other one had a lowered head and bent waist.¹ The remaining four were blocked off to the back and could only been seen slightly—they seemed to be guards or footmen and the like.

Song Jing-gong had already lost control and seeing that there were more people coming to see the chicks, his smile was no longer that natural as he stood in the way there and said: “It’s just for fun. It was actually done using a hen to brood it and then, brought over on top of the kang [bed-stove].”

“You are...?” Not waiting for that person with the protruding belly to speak, the person by their side who had just been ingratiatingly smiling stuck out his chest, narrowing his eyes while looking toward Song Jing-gong as he asked.

“I’m not worthy—a Juren surnamed Song, name of Jing-gong.” Song Jing-gong, knowing that he couldn’t show timidity at this time, raised his head as he spoke.

“Oh, just a Juren. I’d thought a Valedictorian arrived, ~ne! Boss, let us go inside to look more closely.” This person scoffed once before transforming back into that deferential appearance, causing anyone seeing this to sigh at the sight.

This boss strode inside and even casually grunted, not even sparing a look at Song Jing-gong. The four people behind him also entered one after another, squeezing into this room until there was no room.

When they had come near, it just so happened that another chick had smashed open the shell to struggle outward, ~ne. This boss' eyes immediately lit up. He wasn't a fool, either, and understood that this method was the most important—the chicks simply didn't matter.

“Old Father, didn't we reach an agreement just now? Leave this matter to me.” Song Jing-gong also turned around and when facing the old man, he wagged his eyebrows and blinked his eyes while using his hands to mime counting money.

The old man seemed to not have seen Song Jing-gong's gesture and didn't even respond to his words but faced the newly arrived people as he said: “This sir,² you [honorific] see, this was all done by my daughter-in-law. As long as eggs are placed on top of this kang [bed-stove], after a few days, chicks will come out.”

“Oh? It's not this easy, right?” This boss beamed while gazing at the old man as he asked, his words carrying a hint of a threatening intent.

“This little old boy³ doesn't know. It was all handled by my daughter-in-law. Mister Song, what were you saying before?” The old man put on an appearance of not being afraid at all before turning his head to ask Song Jing-gong.

Song Jing-gong was this angry, ~ah. Once he saw the old man's behavior, he understood. This old man was not a bit stupid. Perhaps, the one who had spread the news had been this family. The more people who set their eyes on this, then the more money that this family could make. Now, he no longer thought that this was a scam. Those chickens really had come out.

Seeing that the old man had pushed him forward, he wanted to refuse but he couldn't bear giving up so could only be this villain. Wanting to make his own expression a bit more natural but discovering that it wasn't feasible, he simply put on a stony face as he said:

“Old Father, I just now said that this matter would all be managed by me. By then, I'll help you [honorific] sell the chicks. I wonder whether Old Father will agree or not?”

After Song Jing-gong finished speaking, he looked back to meet the gazes of those six people before turning his head around, not even wishing to see them.

“This house is the place that was said to be able to use whatever kang [bed-stove] to hatch chicks?” Just as the two groups of people were there working out their eyes, a voice rose from outside again.

“Mister, that is exactly so. This little one has asked around thoroughly. You [honorific], please go in.” This should be another servant as servants basically all spoke like this.

Sure enough, several people appeared in the doorway again. One of them was around 20 years old, having just come of age,⁴ his body clad in fluttery white clothing that appeared endlessly romantic and dashing.⁵ Seeing that there was already no standing room within the room, his brow creased slightly. That person by his side then spoke up and said: “Anyone alive, come out. Don’t you see my family’s Mister has arrived?”

“Unh-humph! Xiaowu,⁶ how can you speak thusly, ~ne. Could you have forgotten what Mister, I have normally taught you?” This mister didn’t speak out while Xiaowu had been speaking, only waiting until Xiaowu had finished speaking to feign being a good guy with a smile as breezy and light as the wind and clouds on his face.

Other than Yingtao and the other person that had followed, everyone else in the room were all a bit nervous. This Mister was not common, ~ah. Even Song Jing-gong felt that no matter how he faked it, he himself couldn’t fake putting on such airs.

The face veil-wearing Yingtao and the other person basically didn’t feel anything. To see an elegant demeanor, just look at their own Little Mister to know—that was what pretty should be called—with a white and plump appearance, big eyes that were pure and clean, two round dimples with a smile, speaking words that couldn’t be disobeyed. Within the command tent devising strategies that decide the victory within 1,000 li [mile] outside;⁷ after growing up a bit, which Mister could compare?

This was just great now. Three groups of people were gathered

together, each finding the other to be eyesores. For the sake of allowing the latecomer Mister to enter the room to observe, the old man even drove out the footmen of that boss who had been second to arrive. After all, this was his home.

Of the chicks on top of the kang [bed-stove] now, five had already come out. The down on the body of the very first to come out had already dried as it chirped and made noise continuously. Yingtao hurriedly took out the rice soup that had been cooked in advance to feed it.

Seeing this situation, the three groups of people started discussions with the old man. This one said that they were willing to give 10 silver taels; that one said that they could use 100 bolts of silk to exchange for it—in short, they all wanted to obtain this method of hatching chicks with the kang [bed-stove].

The old man glanced at this one, and then glanced at that one, not making a sound as he smiled and waited there. The three groups of people kept on raising the price. When it had been raised to 200 taels of silver ingots,⁸ only Song Jing-gong still dared to bid. The others didn't make a sound as those two groups of people believed that it wasn't worth so much money. How many chickens had to be raised before this money could be earned back?

Just as Song Jing-gong was smugly congratulating himself, people started continuously arriving from outside again until a total of 10 or so groups of people had come to this place. Having seen that you really could use kang [bed-stove] to hatch chicks, there was a deep-pocketed person who opened up with 500 taels of white silver—didn't even know what they were thinking.

Hearing it, Song Jing-gong was also dazed. To have him bring out so much money, he really couldn't. At the same time, he was a bit jealous of this old man's entire family. With so much silver, till which lifetime would they need to spend it, ~ah? Others of this kind of people were all still using things to barter for some commonplace items; if the old man's entire family had so much money, perhaps they'd be in danger.

Seeing that there was no one raising the price again, the old man spoke up: "Everyone, I say, everyone, you are all wealthy people. This old man, I am not. What would I do with this much money? Lest it attracts a calamitous massacre, how about this? Those willing to pay with money can continue to bid; those unwilling to pay with money can also use items in exchange.

Silk, wheat, rice, millet, whether it be soybeans, radishes, horses, oxen, sheep, this kind of stuff—this old man, I can take it all. Then, we can calculate it as silver. Whoever gives the most, this old man, I will have my daughter-in-law sell the recipe for how to hatch chicks to them. Is that all right?"

When everybody heard this, the large majority retreated a bit. After all, it was too much money. If these 500 taels still couldn't get it, then how much did they still want?

However, Song Jing-gong rejoiced in his heart. He had goods valued at 400 silver taels there, ~ne. Added on top were the 200 taels that he had borrowed as well as the 200 taels on hand that he had saved up from before so he could take out 800 taels. Other people might feel like this stuff wasn't worth it but he didn't think

this way.

He was already prepared. As long as he could hatch chicks, then he could continue swindling. Within a few days, he would be able to borrow a sum of money once again.

Just as everybody prepared to continuing bidding, a person abruptly said: “Wait. I wish to ask. What if I buy this recipe and old man, you sell it again to someone else—then, what do I do?”

“Everyone can rest assured. This little old boy, I have already thought it through. At that time, we’ll find the brokerage people to insure it. Of course, if this recipe was leaked by whichever one of you, then don’t blame me. I can only do this in my own home here and have no power or influence so I can’t get too much of a big result.” The old man said at this moment.

Now, everyone was finally at ease thinking that a lone old man wouldn’t dare trick people. Otherwise, just eating the paddles⁹ could beat him to death. Everyone prepared to bid once again when at this time, the old man spoke again.

“Everyone, refrain from worrying. This little old boy has a method that can allow everyone not to break the facade.”

Everybody stopped to hear him speak.

“Child, ~ah, bring over a brush, ink, paper, and ink stone. Everyone, this method of this little old boy is for everyone to write

down the money or items they wish to bring out on paper. Don't let the others see. Then, give it all to me together. Whichever price that I see is highest, I'll give to whichever person. How about it?"

The old man called out and a person from the two people there came out to take out the four treasures of the study that had been prepared in advance to allow these people write on there.

In the beginning, everyone had felt that this method was good. But who knew that when considering how much money or things to offer, they discovered that with this method, they had no way to guess on the others. If that price given was low, there'd be no recipe; if too high, wouldn't it be a monetary loss?

Every single one couldn't help secretly cursing this old man then—he'd actually thought of such a damaging move. But even if they clearly knew this was disadvantageous to them, they still had to write.

When one finished writing to switch to the next one, this person even pulled out that sheet of paper that had been the lining below for fear that the others would see a trace of it. It was good that everyone all knew a few characters and could write a few characters so there was no need to seek another person as a scribe.[10](#)

After a quarter-hour, all of the people had finished writing and stopped, handing the papers over to the old man, and then had been persuaded to wait outside by the old man.

Here, that other man from the manor began to flip through the papers to look at them. Finding one that was willing to pay 700 silver taels, this was the one with the highest price. Next was to take out that sheet of paper of Song Jing-gong's. One look and Song Jing-gong actually wanted to give a bit less in money and had counted that 2,000 dan [stone] of carrots as 400 taels and he had added another 250 taels.

This person nodded his head, handing the paper over to the old man. Then, he quietly instructed a few more sentences as the old man took note of each one.

Outside, Song Jing-gong was also speaking with Songri Nigan. After all, the cargo on the boats belonged to the both of them.

“Songri Nigan, wait until after I’ve gotten the recipe and hatched the chicks, I’ll use the chicks to pay the bill. How’s that?” Song Jing-gong asked.

“Why not also give me a copy of the recipe?” Songri Nigan wasn’t stupid, either, as he wanted the recipe.

“You don’t understand here. You can continue coming here to get the chicks from me; I’ll sell cheaply to you. But if you bring it back, can you hold onto this recipe? How many people will be seeing red, ~ne? You there doesn’t compare to my being protected by the local authorities^{[11](#)} here.” Song Jing-gong argued, giving an analysis of the pros and cons.

Songri Nigan thought on it and it really was like this. So he

noded his head, which could be considered agreement.

Not long after, the old man came out and holding two sheets of paper in his hand, he said: “Everyone, the results have come out. Xiping City’s Owner Li this time is 700 silver taels.”

His words once spoken, the others inhaled sharply while Song Jing-gong’s heart grew cold. If he had known it’d be like this, he would have added a bit more money—that cargo originally wasn’t worth much money.

At this time, the old man said: “Alas, Owner Li was somewhat lacking a bit as Mister Song, with 2,000 dan [stone] of goods equal to 400 silver taels added to 350 silver taels for a total of 750 silver taels, bought the recipe.”

After his voice stopped, that Owner Li said with an ugly expression: “I’ll give 800 taels.”

“Owner Li, you [honorific] have spoken these words too late. If what you [honorific] had written down was 800 taels, then it’d naturally be given to you [honorific]. But perhaps, you [honorific] thought to...” The old man didn’t speak out loud the last words but everyone heard it and understood. Yes, ~ya, if they wanted to get less money, then how could they go back and still give you the recipe? Owner Li also knew that it wasn’t the time for him to say these words so after saying a sentence to take his leave, he hurriedly left.

1] "Di tou wan yao" (低頭彎腰) is an idiom in Chinese that physically describes the general posture of a sycophant bowing and fawning for favor. So to describe someone like this is to label them a toady or lackey.

2] I previously translated "lao ye" (老爺) as "Master" since it is the title that the Zhang servants address Xiaobao's father as. Etymologically, it breaks down to "old lord/grandfather" with the old being used as a honorific rather than for its literal meaning. So other than "Master," it can be used as a generic "lord" or "sir" in ordinary conversation.

3] The old man uses "xiao lao-er" (小老兒) to refer to himself. It literally translates to "little old son," thus explaining my translation choice.

4] "Ji guan" (及冠) is one of the terms for one who has undergone the [Confucian coming of age](#) ceremony for young men of status in ancient China, which is called a "[guan li](#)" (冠禮) or "crown/cap ceremony." The age of a young man reaching adulthood was set to be 20 years old. The term literally means "succeed to crown/cap" as guan/冠 is a type of formal hat, cap, or headgear that can look like coronal headdresses depending on the style or design. Other names that this ceremony could be called are "jia guan" (加冠) or "add crown/cap" and "ruo guan" (弱冠) or "weak crown/cap," the latter term of which was arrived at because at 20 years old, men were usually not as fully developed in body and tending to fill out physically later in life. This ceremony usually involved the young man formally binding his hair and then a respected elder or guest placing the guan/冠 on him like a crowning or capping. This was also the time when the young man received a zi/字 or biao/表,

which is usually translated as [style or courtesy name](#) in English (this custom also explains why historical Chinese figures can be referred to by so many different names and aliases). Having undergone this rite, a young man was then considered to be fully adult and not a child anymore so this is also typically when marriage occurred. Note that this would not be applicable for peasants or commoners who would likely marry much earlier and not have the education or luxury of receiving a style name. Because this ceremony is linked so intrinsically with a young man reaching his 20th year, most mention of this ceremony is to state his age, which is similar to describing a Catholic boy as having undergone [confirmation](#) or a Jewish youth as having had a [bar mitzvah](#). Due to the influence of Chinese culture, this ceremony has historically been a rite of passage for [Japanese](#), [Korean](#), and Vietnamese young men as well.

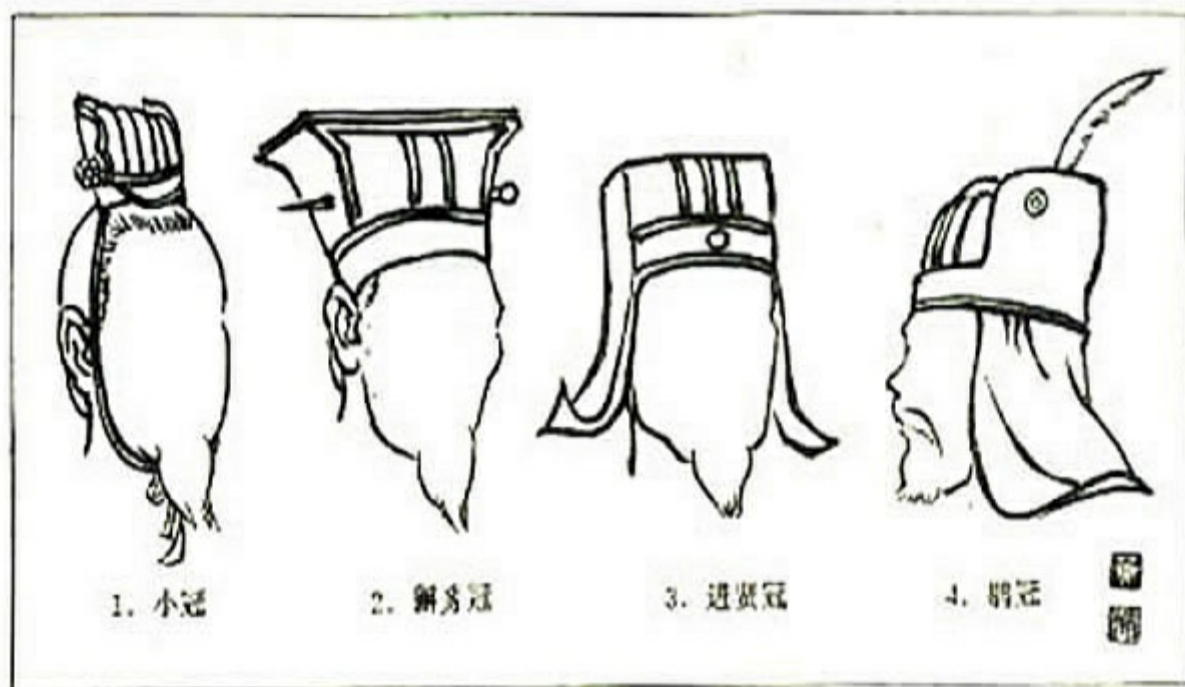


图 1 冠式之一

Above are some examples of these types of guan/冠.

5] The 4-character couplet used here is “feng liu xiao sa” ([風流瀟灑](#))

[灑](#)). The reason I am footnoting this is because “feng liu” (風流) has multiple connotations though it literally means “wind flow,” which can make it confusing to people unaware of the possible context. Though I chose to translate “feng liu” (風流) as romantic this time because its meaning was modified by its combination with “xiao sa” (瀟灑) meaning “free and unrestrained,” it can tend to come up by itself such as when describing playboys or lechers. So you will likely see “feng liu” (風流) being used for its connotation of “loose” or “debauched” in the latter circumstances. In this case, though it is possible this young master could also be a playboy, he is being so described to show that he projects an uncommon aura.

[6\]](#) “Xiaowu” (小五) means “little five.”

[7\]](#) This is a quote that has its origins in [Han Shu](#) (漢書) or the [Book of Han](#), which was a historiographic work by [Ban Gu](#) (班固) and Ban Zhao (班昭) that covered the entirety of the [Western Han dynasty](#). Specifically, the quote is from [Part II](#) of the Annals of [Emperor Gaozu](#) or “Gaodi Ji Xia” (高帝紀下). In the text, Gaozu is praising a general by the name of [Zhang Liang](#) (張良), who he refers to by the [style name](#) of Zifang (子房), as one who is better skilled than he is: “籌帷幄之中，決勝千里之外，吾不如子房。” The same turn of phrase was later reused in one of the [Four Great Classic Novels of Chinese literature](#), [Journey to the West](#) or “Xi You Ji” 《西遊記》 by Ming dynasty novelist [Wu Cheng'en](#) (吳承恩) as: “後果然運籌帷幄之中，決勝千里之外。” Thus, two 4-character couplets could be taken from this one source that act as a shorthand for this entire quote. The first one is “yun chou wei wo” (運籌帷幄), which means to strategize within the command tent while the second one is “jue sheng qian li” (決勝千里), which means to decide victory from a thousand li away. Both of them are compliments of a great command or leadership ability. Gaozu was praising Zhang Liang as

a general who could decide victory from a distance by just devising a plan within his command tent so Yingtao is equating Xiaobao with Zhang Liang in skill here.

8] “Wen yin” (紋銀) translates to fine silver or silver ingots where the silver was cast into molds. A “yuan bao” (元寶), which is known as a sycee in English since the word was imported through Cantonese (細絲), is an example of such silver ingot currency used in ancient China.

9] Banzi/板子 refers to an instrument used in a form of “chi xing” (笞刑) or beating punishment, one of the [Five Punishments](#) that was used in [ancient Chinese courts](#). This was a form of corporal punishment by the state where the person was beaten on the buttocks with bamboo canes or wooden boards/paddles. With the great breadth of power a local magistrate had within their own courtroom, a beating could be arbitrarily handed out to anyone for any trumped up reason, much less a situation where a defendant was found guilty.

10] I translated the Chinese used here as “scribe” even though “dai bi” (代筆), which literally means “substitute pen,” can mean “ghostwrite.” But in this case, it is actually describing when a scribe or clerk helps an illiterate person transcribe the message that they wish written down though that is a form of ghostwriting, too.

11] The local authorities here are referred to as “guan fu” (官府), which is the local court system that included, not just the magistrate and officials, but the staff associated with the “[yamen](#)” (衙門) such as the “ya yi” (衙役), which is usually translated as

runners but were the ancient Chinese version of a prototypical local police or sheriff and deputies who stood in as a basic form of military power for the magistrate to keep the local populace in check with in addition to assisting with enforcing the law judicially.

Chapter 26: Interlocking Chain Of Plots

Within Plots

Song Jing-gong stood there, his head a bit dizzy. He felt that he hadn't remembered correctly as he had written down 2,000 dan [stone] of goods and 250 taels in silver. When had it turned into 350 taels—could it be that this old man had misread II¹ and III² incorrectly?

He wanted to ask for the stuff he wrote down so he could see it but was also afraid that the old man would look it over carefully and call over that Owner Li, so he could only nod his head as he said: “Unh, this Mister, I³ desire this recipe. I wonder when it will be handed over?”

“Immediately—there's already somebody who has gone to get the people from brokerage to come over here. Once they've arrived, that recipe will be written down for you.” The old man sighed in relief at this moment. He had been rather afraid of screwing up the matter that Little Mister had assigned him.

Shortly afterward, people from the brokerage arrived. Once both sides completed signing of the contract, Yingtao passed the recipe that had already been recorded over into Song Jing-gong's hands. Song Jing-gong didn't wait for long as he unfolded it to read it. On here was written how to build a kang [bed-stove]. It was very simple. With just a sweeping glance, Song Jing-gong understood how it was done.

As for the part after that on how to handle the chicken eggs, that

was even simpler as what he saw written on there was: ‘Find several brooding hens. Wait until it has started brooding a nest, then stretch a hand underneath its abdomen to feel the temperature. Afterward, fire the kang [bed-stove] and place chicken eggs on top. Wait until there isn’t a big difference in the temperature from under the chicken abdomen and it will work. Note: when touching the chicken, be wary of being pecked.’

Reading these words, Song Jing-gong understood it with just a slight bit of thought into it. It was that simple. He regretted it. To exchange using that much money and items for such an easily understood recipe—how could he do that?

“This recipe is fake. You have to pay me back money.” Song Jing-gong held onto the recipe as he loudly yelled.

The people who had arrived from the brokerage also simultaneously fixed their eyes on the four people of the old man’s group. That meaning was if the recipe is fake, then you will have to pay reparations. If you can’t, then you’ll have to go to jail.

“If Mister Song thinks that the recipe is fake, then please hand the recipe over into the hands of the people from the brokerage and wait for them to return and put it into practice. If the chicks come out, Mister Song, what should you do then?” Over there, Yingtao said coldly.

How could Song Jing-gong risk giving the recipe to the people from the brokerage? If it really was handed over, then the people from the brokerage would not only know the recipe, he himself would also be nabbed. Seeing the people from the brokerage look

over here, he awkwardly laughed and said: “A joke, just a joke. It’s a real recipe—how could it be fake?”

“If that’s so, then Mister Song, pay the money and goods.” The people from the brokerage didn’t show Song Jing-gong any good face. They frequently worked this industry so how could they not know what Song Jing-gong was thinking in his heart? Sweeping a scornful eye over Song Jing-gong, they spoke up.

“Right, right, let’s leave here to get the money and hand over the goods.” Song Jing-gong carefully stowed away the recipe. Together with Songri Nigan, the old man’s entire family of four along with the people he brought with him and the clinging ghostly shade⁴ of a person following him as well as the guarantor from the brokerage, they first withdrew the money and then hurried on the way to Luo River.

They came out in the morning, only arriving in the afternoon, being not that much slower than when he had arrived. After all, everyone was anxious and didn’t wish to delay.

When they’d arrived at the docks, Songri Nigan and Song Jing-gong were flummoxed to discover that there were countless carriages parked over here and even people who appeared to be dedicated to loading the carriages in particular. There were even people guarding burlap sack after burlap sack of stuff waiting over there.

“Mister Song, unload the cargo. I’ve already found people to come over and haul the cargo.” Yingtao spoke up.

Song Jing-gong nodded and began to order people to unload the cargo. 2,000 dan [stone] of goods—it would need to be unloaded for a while to be finished. This side unloaded while that side loaded; once a carriage was full, a carriage would leave. There were even people specifically sorting over there, choosing those ones that they thought were about the same and then, taking out dirt from a burlap sack, they would wrap up the bottom of the sweet plants—or rather, carrots—to carefully line up inside the carriage so that they weren't stacked into a huge pile.

When night had fallen, 2,000 dan [stone] of goods had finally been completely unloaded and the filled carriages on that side had all left, leaving not a bit behind.

Song Jing-gong was puzzled. How could an old man's family of four get so many carriages? So he asked: "How did you hire the carriages? That many carriages sure isn't easy to hire, ~ah."

Yingtao removed the cloth covering her face, taking out a damp handkerchief to wipe her face as she said with a smile: "Mister Song has no need to worry too much. Based on the financial power of our two manors of Zhang and Wang, what does it matter to get some carriages here? Even more carriages can be had, too."

"You, you're that little kid's maid servant from that Manor Zhang of Tuqiao Village?" Song Jing-gong felt like a giant chunk of ice had suddenly been crammed into his belly as his entire body was chilled from inside and out. He'd made thousands and tens of thousands calculations yet he hadn't counted on failing to swindle someone while they had swindled him.

There must be something fishy⁵ about that recipe but he couldn't think of where something had gone wrong. That's right, ~ah. Doing it like that really could have chicks that hatched—then, why, ~ne?

But he couldn't think of himself as not having been swindled. Otherwise, how could all of this have happened at the same time? Could it be that there was still somewhere that an error had occurred?

At this time, a person came running over from a distance, running as they yelled: "Mister Song, bad news! Big problem! Bad news!"

Song Jing-gong raised his head to look. It was unexpectedly Storekeeper Zhao from that antiques and collectible art store of his. How did he come here?

When Storekeeper Zhao had run to arrive in front of them, he vigorously gasped for two breaths before he said: "Mister Song, it's a big problem and bad news. Noteworthy House is going to be finished!"

"Finished what? How is it finished? You have to explain it to me clearly." Upon hearing these words, Song Jing-gong's fluttered for a moment and he could only brace himself as he asked.

"My fault—it could be said to be my fault. I didn't know you

[honorific] had already mortgaged Noteworthy House. Otherwise, I would have discovered it earlier.” Storekeeper Zhao tearfully said.

“You, speak to me of the matter—exactly what is going on?” Song Jing-gong was inwardly growing more fretful.

“Yes, I’ll speak. These two days, I and Liu Wang had been staying in the restaurant and... And that red-light district.⁶ Originally, we wanted to return but the person in the back watching the building came over to say, say that Mister, you [honorific] and other people had matters to discuss within the store so I needn’t be in a hurry about returning within the next few days. Otherwise, if I offended the noble personage,⁷ my having several lives wouldn’t even be enough.

So I believed for real and stayed there with Liu Wang until today before returning to have a look. The result was that there are no longer any people inside the store and there were several people who said that they were from Manor Zhang standing guard there. And they even told me that the store had been mortgaged away.” Storekeeper Zhao finally blurted out the entire story.

After hearing this, Song Jing-gong wrinkled his brow as he felt like this Storekeeper Zhao that he had hired really couldn’t come out in public—someone said something and they just believed it? Didn’t he just want to continue relaxing in that kind of place so he found such an excuse?

“Fine, fine. It was me that mortgaged it. Wait over the next few days and it’ll return. You can still be storekeeper there and I won’t drive you away. Whatever should be done should be done. Don’t stay here where I am.”

Song Jing-gong still decided not to mind this matter. That store wasn't important. Big deal as the money could just be returned. Now, there was a new moneymaking method. The stuff on the boats had been sold and it could be considered to have cheated Zhang Family once.

“No, Mister, it's not that simple, ~ah! Just as you [honorific] had the manor mortgaged few days ago, there were people who came over to buy things. They bought that painting. I set a high price of 150 taels of silver. That person didn't take it away directly but left behind 50 taels as a deposit.

After half a month, if they still didn't come to get it, then for every late day, that Mister Li would pay an extra 100 wen [cash] in money. Once an entire month was reached without it being retrieved, the down payment would then be given to the store. If by then it wasn't said painting, the store would need to pay tenfold the compensation in silver taels. But you [honorific] have mortgaged away the store so how can the painting be brought out?”

Storekeeper Zhao was already crying as he recounted the matter from beginning to end for Song Jing-gong to hear.

“Ah? Painting? What painting? Is that the painting with scorch marks on it?” When Song Jing-gong asked this, droplets of cold sweat dripped down one after the other.

“Yes, ~ah. Mister, how did you [honorific] know? I haven't even

spoken of it to you.” Storekeeper Zhao asked in response.

“Finished, it’s all finished. What a ruthless Manor Zhang. Why did I allow my heart to be tempted by a ghost⁸ in the first place and insist on crossing that bridge, ~ne? How much money do I still have? 50 taels—right, I still have 50 taels. It can’t be repaid. What to do? What to do?”

Song Jing-gong’s eyes widened as he continued muttering, greatly frightening Storekeeper Zhao. Not even thinking, he went up and gave a great slap to the mouth. With a “pa” sound, Song Jing-gong finally recovered—only his complexion was ghastly white; it didn’t need to be more frightening, it was already that frightening.

“Mister Song, have you thought on what to do? From the start, everyone said that you were a swindler yet my family’s Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan said that you were a good person. I didn’t believe it, then. Today, it looks like it really is true. Mister Song, you [honorific] are a philanthropist, ~ah.”

Yingtao didn’t forget to jab at Song Jing-gong at this time. She felt that it really was too enjoyable. No wonder Little Miss Juan-Juan and Little Mister said that Song Jing-gong wasn’t a swindler. This really was the Dao being a chi [foot] high while the demonic was a zhang [yard] high.⁹ Monster, worthy of being a monster. Ai~, Mister Song was actually quite pitiable. How could he encounter Little Mister, this kind of person, ~ne? No wonder Little Mister said to give him a single chance back then.

After a long while, Song Jing-gong smoothed out his breathing.

Looking over at Yingtao whose face had blossomed into a smile and thinking of the things that he had encountered this time, he nodded his head and said:

“Fine. Manor Zhang, you’re formidable. Isn’t there still time? I’ll go raise the money and return your manor’s money. I don’t believe that you can force me to death? Come on, you can make everyone not lend money to me? I have this recipe in hand, what do I fear? Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Yingtao looked at Song Jing-gong with pity, shaking her head slightly as she said: “Mister Song, you really want to use that recipe to get money? My family’s Little Mister hopes you can go to him there and see him to talk face-to-face.”

“Meet? Go see that little kid of your family that hasn’t even been weaned off of milk? Are you kidding me? Does he want to eat sugar, ~ah? He-he-he-he, I acknowledge it; your Manor Zhang has won this time.” Song Jing-gong, hearing Yingtao’s words, curled his lips in ridicule as he sarcastically spoke.

Yingtao shook her head and said: “It’s not like that. My family’s Little Mister doesn’t like eating sugar. Little Mister wishes to save your life.”

Actually, Yingtao was even more furious within her heart. She would not allow other people to look down on Little Mister. What person was Little Mister, ~ah? But she still suppressed her temper as she spoke.

“Save my life? Keep dreaming! Wait, wait until I’ve turned things around, I’ll have you all paid back a thousand, a hundredfold.” Song Jing-gong was filled with rage till his entire body was trembling with it. A little kid actually even dared to speak of saving his life.

“Then, fine. Since Mister Song has already decided, then don’t blame my family’s Little Mister for not showing any mercy. In a while, there will be another new recipe being sold. It’ll be sold very cheaply. This could be said to be a recipe that I just thought up and is better than the recipe in Mister’s hands. This wouldn’t be considered selling a recipe multiple times, right?” Yingtao sighed once as she slowly spoke before turning around to leave.

Song Jing-gong was dumbfounded. When Yingtao had already walked 20 or so steps and had nearly boarded the horse carriage, only then did he suddenly move and shouting as he came running over in pursuit: “Wait, wait, I’ll go! I don’t wish to die.”

Yingtao stopped in her tracks, not turning around but the corner of her mouth had already revealed a trace of a smile as she said to herself: “Little Mister’s calculations overlook nothing, that’s sure enough.”

Notes:

1] 貳 is the [accounting character](#) used to render the number 2 when recording finances, which is otherwise written as 二. Since the characters normally used for numbers are some of the simplest to write in the Chinese language, forgery was easily done by simply

adding a few extra strokes. Thus, an alternate form of writing the Chinese numbers specifically for the sake of preventing such forgery was created. These characters are deliberately complicated, making it hard to alter them. To try to recreate this effect of using an alternate writing system to record numbers in English, I used [Roman numerals](#) in the translation.

2] 叁 is the [accounting character](#) for the number 3, which is normally written as 三 in Chinese. These accounting characters are referred to as “da xie shu zi” ([大寫數字](#)), which means “great writing numeral characters.” To try to recreate this effect of using an alternate writing system to record numbers in English, I translated using Roman numerals. Ironically, it’s a lot easier to confuse some [Roman numerals](#) for another than it is to confuse the Chinese accounting characters for another.

3] “Ben gongzi” (本公子) is an [illeism](#) that is not humble in tone at all. Though wo/我 or “I” isn’t used in the original Chinese, his choice of words emphasizes that his status is high enough to warrant being a self-proclaimed gongzi/公子 or “Mister.” Because of this, I have combined the literal translation of “this Mister” with “I” to avoid reader confusion over the pronoun usage as well as to convey the pride evident in his tone.

4] “Yin hun bu shan” ([陰魂不散](#)), which literally translates to “dark ([yin](#)) soul not dispersing,” is a Chinese idiom describing a ghost or shade that is stubbornly clinging to the mortal world and refuses to pass on to the next life. Here, it is being used as a metaphor for how doggedly Xiaoqi is tailing Song Jing-gong.

5] I translated it as fishy but in Chinese, “you gui” (有鬼) literally

means “has ghost” and the presence of a ghost is a way to say suspicious or questionable in nature.

6] I’ve translated “yan hua zhi di” (煙花之地) as [red-light district](#), which is “hong deng qu” (紅燈區) in Chinese, since the literal meaning of “place of fireworks” wouldn’t make sense as [fireworks](#) weren’t invented yet—at least, not until [gunpowder](#) was invented and started being produced in enough quantities to allow for the invention of fireworks during the [Tang dynasty](#). Most likely, this Chinese euphemism for a brothel means “place of smoky flowers,” which would refer to the smokiness of the environment as well as the ephemeral nature of the “flowers” found there. There are other flower-related euphemisms for brothels and red-light districts in Chinese that I won’t list here that would support this conclusion of mine though.

7] “Gui ren” (貴人) or a noble person were usually patrons that were courted for the advantage or backing they could give and not easily approached. They didn’t necessarily have to be literally nobility though as long as they had a status or position that necessitated their special treatment. In short, this is the ancient Chinese way of saying [VIP](#) or VVIP. I opted not to use VIP in the translation since I thought the acronym would be rather distracting as it gives off a rather modern vibe in my opinion. Coincidentally, Guiren/貴人 can also be the official rank or title of an Imperial concubine as well.

8] The Chinese used here is “gui mi le xin qiao” ([鬼迷了心竅](#)), which is similar to saying “succumb to temptation.” This is an idiom that relies on the belief that ghosts or spirits could possess or mesmerize people and make them act contrary to their reason or logic. It’s similar in thinking to the excuse of “the devil made me

do it” in English.

9] I translated the Chinese saying of “dao gao yi chi, mo gao yi zhang” (道高一尺, 魔高一丈) literally. It’s a phrase that describes the difficulty or continuous trial that [Daoists](#) face when attempting to refine their [qi](#) 氣) while seeking enlightenment through the [Dao](#) (道) or “path” with the distraction of the outside world acting like demons that impede their way. So this saying is meant to summarize two themes in life—one, success is quickly followed by an even harder trial to surmount in order to continue succeeding; two, newer and better things constantly come out and surpass the old so that there is a constant one-upmanship. However, this expression can also be used to describe situations where it is a one-sided battle and a significant margin between the two opposing sides is visible. In these cases, depending on the moral alignment of the stronger side, this idiom could be modified or reversed with the presumption that the Dao-aligned side is considered to be good or righteous.

Chapter 27: Have To Strike At People From Within The Heart

The dark clouds rolled as the fierce winds rose with one look that could behold the horizon. The flash of lightning and rumble of thunder gave birth to the rain that seemed to blanket the distant mountains.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, the two of them stood on top of a little stool, leaning against the windowsill to look outside. The great rain poured down in buckets, hitting the ground in drips and drops as water bubble after water bubble appeared and disappeared. Resembling a fine mist, countless rivulets of water gathered together, undulating towards the lowlying areas.

“I originally thought to give some carrots to the people at the manor. But it looks like we can only wait till the weather’s clear to speak of it again.” Wang Juan bit on a carrot strip in her mouth, speaking with a muffled voice.

“Unh, I heard people mention this before. With carrots, this stuff requires oil when cooking them to be able to better let people absorb the nutrition. How could peasants have that much oil, ~ah? Carrot seeds themselves can produce oil, right?” Upon speaking of the peasants, Zhang Xiaobao crinkled up in an appearance of worried concern.

“They can. They’re actually rather expensive, ~ne. I’ve bought it before. You know how to make it?” Wang Juan used a

handkerchief to wipe her mouth as she spoke; the drool was a natural phenomenon.

“No, but I know how to make soybean oil.¹ It’s very easy. Just get something like a bucket and place the soybeans inside. Then, don’t stop adding wedges inside. The oil is forced out using physical pressure, leaving behind the soybean press cake.² Some unscrupulous people would use this soybean press cake to make tofu but it’s not good tasting at all.”

“You~! You also know quite a few things?” Wang Juan had never seen this kind of method to press soybean oil before so was a bit disbelieving.

Zhang Xiaobao didn’t argue, either, and only slowly said: “What does this count for? There are some elderly people who, if they spoke of the things that they knew how to do, would scare you. Some simple herbal medicine recipes, acupuncture and moxibustion,³ cupping,⁴ scraping,⁵ brick-laying work, the breeding and rearing of animals, different kinds of crop planting experience, woodworking, charcoal burning, brick firing, basket weaving—they know all of this.

While some people use this knowledge to show off with, those honest people were already passing it down from generation to generation until it had been assimilated within their own lifestyle as a way to continue on living and a matter of instinct.

Other than the ones that I’ve mentioned, my Director Grandpa also knew how to paint, do brush calligraphy,⁶ engraving, feng

shui⁷ reading; all the things to do with repairing the cracked jars, pots, and bowls⁸ as well as grinding the scissors and polishing the kitchen knives⁹ within the courtyard house were all done by him.”

As Zhang Xiaobao spoke, he seemed to sink into nostalgia once again as the expression on his face didn't stop changing until finally, he exhaled a long, deep breath and smiled at Wang Juan. That meaning was to tell her not to worry.

“It can't be? I'm not saying that there's no people that know these things, I'm saying that orphanage of yours can't have not even been able to afford a single bowl? To actually need to repair cracks—who still knows how to repair cracks? Hearing my mom and dad [modern] speak of it, whenever they broke a dish or bowl during their childhood, they would get beaten. Then later on, there was simply no one who'd care.” Wang Juan was a bit surprised.

“Let's not speak of these matters. When light appears, the other side always has darkness. A good environment is nothing more than shadowless light, which is to obscure the darkness even more and nothing more than not allowing it to be easily found. Above the shadowless light is also darkness. This time, the money gotten from Swindler Song was a lot. Have people collect soybeans tomorrow. I want to extract oil.”

Zhang Xiaobao wiped away a droplet of rainwater that had fallen upon his face, returning to a child's expression as he lightly spoke.

The sound of the two speaking was rather low so Xiaohong who

was sitting by that place at the doorway only knew that the little ancestors were there speaking of whatever matters but was unclear as to the particulars.

Now, she was no longer worried that danger would appear with Little Mister and Little Miss. The thing that she needed to do was to act as an assistant by their side. It was raining outside today so she could sit here and learn her characters. This was requested by Little Mister—each and every one of the people within the courtyard house must know how to read and write as well as how to calculate simple accounts.

As well as this, Little Miss Juan-Juan had also said that in the future, people would be hired to teach the children of the two manors with all of the expenses being wholly managed by the two families of Zhang and Wang. The only request was no matter whether the education had been completed or not, they all had to treat the manor's honor as their honor, shame as their shame.

Xiaohong couldn't figure it out at all how the two little ancestors were actually thinking as the things they did always felt a bit like antelopes hanging their horns¹⁰ or celestial steeds traveling the skies.¹¹ Unh, these were the words that the manor's accountant had said—learned people were really not the same.

When the three people split into two groups to do their own work, Steward Zhang's voice rose from within the rain outside.

“Mister Song, It's raining today. You [honorific] see? It's so much that Little Mister has no way to come out to play and is currently

inside the room. If you [honorific] could wait a moment till I can go in to report.”

“If that’s so, then Steward Zhang has been troubled.” Song Jing-gong’s voice spoke afterward, giving off a listless impression to the listener.

Steward Zhang entered the exterior door and when he walked inside, he saw Xiaohong sitting there thinking on things. According to his usual inclination, he would give a scolding here. He had just opened his mouth to speak when he raised his head to catch sight of the two little ancestors standing close by the window so he swallowed his words.

He certainly knew that Little Mister wasn’t a person who was that easily fooled. If such actions from Xiaohong hadn’t been given implicit permission by Little Mister, then Xiaohong would definitely dare not to do so. If he really had opened his mouth to rebuke Little Mister’s maid servant, that consequence... Just thinking about it was scary. Song Jing-gong was such an intelligent man but look at the state that Little Mister had bullied him into?

“Steward Zhang, is there something? Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan typically don’t allow people to bother them.” Xiaohong had also seen Steward Zhang and was a bit afraid, moving the book in her hand behind her back as she spoke.

“An urgent matter—Song Jing-gong, Mister Song has arrived. He’d arrived at the manor yesterday night but didn’t dare to come over and interrupt Little Mister’s rest, so he endured the rain to

arrive here today. Unh, you go and speak of it. Study the books well. The people by Little Mister's side can't be lacking in comparison to other families."

Steward Zhang saw that Xiaohong had a book to read so that had certainly been arranged for by Little Mister. He really didn't know how to evaluate this little ancestor. Such a formidable person as Song Jing-gong had actually been frightened to the point that he hadn't slept well yesterday night. His eyes were still ringed with black, ~ne.

"Unh, you've come? Please come in, then. Go make tea according to the method that I taught you. Here now, I can busy myself over matters a little less." Zhang Xiaobao had actually already heard the sound of Song Jing-gong talking outside but he still waited for Xiaohong to finish talking before speaking up.

Song Jing-gong held up an umbrella while he stood in the rain, allowing that rainwater flowing downward to soak his own shoes, not moving one bit. Even if the wind blew in at an angle and brought with it rain that saturated the lower half of his body, he still didn't feel it.

He kept on thinking of the words that Yingtao had said when he had arrived yesterday. He had asked Yingtao which adept had plotted against him. At that time, Yingtao had curled her lips and said what adept is needed to plot against you? My family's Little Mister will do. That day, when you set foot upon the bridge, you'd already had no path of retreat.

How she said this was frightening, ~ah. Those in the know

clearly understood that bridge was the one connecting Ge Manor and the two manors of Zhang and Wang; those who didn't know would assume that it was the Bridge of Helplessness,¹² ~ne.

Of course, Song Jing-gong didn't believe it. But then, Yingtao reminded him that could it be that he had forgotten how he had given away the money and given away the jade ornament when he had arrived that day? To take care of this kind of you, my Zhang Manor only needs to send out a one year old child.

This was the cause for Song Jing-gong's conflict. Today, he wanted to see if that child could really be as formidable as how Yingtao had described.

"Mister Song, my family's Little Mister invites you." Just as Song Jing-gong was still in the middle of his thoughts, Steward Zhang came out and spoke in greeting.

"Good, many thanks to Steward Zhang. Steward Zhang, wait. This Song has some doubts in his heart and kindly asks Steward Zhang to help with one or two of them." Song Jing-gong was about to go inside but then, stopped Steward Zhang.

"Mister Song, please speak freely."

"This Song wants to know if the words that Steward Zhang said to your noble manor's Mistress outside of this Song's window that day was intentional? What connection is there with your noble manor's Little Mister?" Song Jing-gong had thought of a few particular details.

“Mister Song, we will be working together from now on so please take care of me.” Steward Zhang answered what was not asked, stretching out a hand in a gesture of invitation before turning around to leave.

Filled with misgiving, Song Jing-gong stepped inside. After bypassing the outer room, he saw that in the inner room there, a cushion had already been prepared. In between the cushion and the little couch opposite it was an end table.¹³ Song Jing-gong naturally knew that the cushion was for him to sit on so not bothering with manners, he walked in and sat down.

When he looked toward the couch, there was actually nobody on it. At this time, his eyes had just adjusted to the brightness in the room so when he looked around again, he saw the two little kids from that day standing by the window there looking at the rainy scenery outside, ~ne.

“Xiaobao, what do you say—is going outside for a turn better than staying inside?” Song Jing-gong heard the little girl’s voice.

“No, the rain outside is too big. Besides, using an umbrella is tiresome, too.” Song Jing-gong also heard the little boy’s activity.

“Use what umbrella? Wearing a straw raincoat¹⁴ will do, ~ah. Look at the mountains, gaze at the rainy view. How is that phrase said? Oh, it’s called ‘in straw bearing a lifetime of smoke and rain.’”¹⁵ The little girl’s voice.

“No, I’ll get sick. By then, it’ll be ‘the flowing wind is to always be buffeted by the rain and blown away by the wind.’”¹⁶ The little boy’s voice.

Song Jing-gong heard this and for a moment, he felt like he had gone to the wrong place. This wasn’t Zhang Manor; this was the Imperial Academy.¹⁷ Before the window weren’t little kids but were clearly two xiucai.¹⁸

“Ya~, Mister Song has arrived. Pardon me, pardon me. Xiaohong, serve tea.” As if just discovering that there was another person in the room, Zhang Xiaobao, pulling along Wang Juan, jumped down from the stool as they both came over to this side with the couch and sat there while giving greeting.

“Well said, well said. Mister Zhang here was too absorbed. Wonder who this little miss by Mister Zhang’s side is...?” Song Jing-gong unwittingly and inadvertently treated this little kid in front of him like an adult, only realizing after he had spoken that these were clearly two children.

“Oh, this one is this Zhang’s green plum and bamboo horse,¹⁹ Wang Manor’s Juan-Juan.” Zhang Xiaobao gestured with his hand as he gave an introduction.

“Green plum and bamboo horse?” Song Jing-gong was confused again. What was the meaning?

Wang Juan spoke up at this time: “It’s the meaning of ‘boy comes riding a bamboo horse; winding around the bed are green plums; two little ones with no suspicions.’²⁰ So stupid. And you’re even a Juren, ~ne. With learning, there’s no learning; with swindling, you still can’t beat others in swindling.”

Wang Juan had already lowered her voice with those last words but Song Jing-gong could still hear them clearly. If it were anyone else saying this, he would debate this point but facing these two kids today, he only felt a kind of helplessness. Where had the ancestral tombs of the two families of Zhang and Wang been buried?²¹

At this time, Xiaohong had already served the tea. In front of Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan was hot tea. In front of Song Jing-gong were two kinds of tea, one hot and one cold. Regardless of whether they were hot or cold, they were all very green and different from the ones that Song Jing-gong had drank before in the past.

“Mister Zhang, this is...?” Song Jing-gong pointed at the cold tea²² as he asked.

“Cold tea.” Zhang Xiaobao explained.

“Oh, then why does only this Song have it?” Song Jing-gong asked again.

“With people of status, who would drink cold tea? You joking?

Juan-Juan and I are too young; it's too easy to get an upset stomach from drinking cold things.” Zhang Xiaobao said while smiling.

Notes:

1] Though “dou you” (豆油) literally translates to a generic “bean oil,” it is because [soybeans](#) are the largest bean crop in Asia so they hardly needed to point out that the bean in question was soybean, which is similar to how hardly anyone points out that flour tends to really mean wheat flour since it is already understood to be wheat without further elaboration. [Soybean oil](#) is commonly used as a cooking oil though it also has other applications.

2] “Dou bing” (豆餅) translates to “bean cake” but the cake part actually refers to the [oil or press cake](#) that's left behind after the liquid or oil is extracted and it's not an actual finished product that's prepared for consumption purposes. To ensure the reader's understanding and avoid confusion, I translated this term as “soybean press cake.”

3] For those who aren't aware, “zhen jiu” (針灸) is the Chinese term for the combined practice of [acupuncture](#) and [moxibustion](#) within [traditional Chinese medicine](#) that involves sticking needles into the body at [acupuncture points](#) and the burning of ground up [Chinese mugwort](#) ([moxa](#) in English based on the Japanese pronunciation) on the acupuncture needles or patient's skin. The therapy is typically used for pain relief but has a wider range of applications, especially within traditional Chinese medicine. Development of acupuncture rose from Chinese concepts such as [qi](#), [meridians](#), etc.

4] “Ba guanzi” (拔罐子) or “[cupping](#)” is a form of therapy in [traditional Chinese medicine](#) that involves using cups to form suction on the skin in the belief that this encouraged blood flow in order to heal the body. Cupping therapy is generally divided into two types, which are dry cupping and fire cupping.

5] “[Gua Sha](#)” (刮痧), which I’ve translated as “scraping,” is a form of treatment in [traditional Chinese medicine](#) where practitioners scraped the patient’s skin to cause bruising. The thinking behind this therapy was that the scraping released internal toxins and increased blood circulation as well as encouraged healing.

6] Xiaobao refers to it as “maobi zi” (毛筆字) or “ink brush characters” when he really means [Chinese calligraphy](#) or “book method” (書法), which is the writing of [Chinese characters](#) using an [ink brush](#).

7] “[Feng shui](#)” (風水) literally translates to “wind water” and is a practice that believes in harmonizing people with nature and has its origins in [Daoist](#) beliefs and concepts such as [qi](#), the eight trigrams or bagua (八卦), and the [yin-yang theory](#). It also uses Chinese astrology and the Five Elements system or “[Wu Xing](#)” (五行), having some fortune-telling aspects to it as well. Feng shui was important in ancient China (and today!) as people would seek out practitioners to find a location with the best qi or energy flow to build a structure so that it can give the most luck and good karma or energy to its owners or inhabitants. In modern times, this could cause decisions in architectural design that wouldn’t make sense to Western thinking like an extraneous looking hole in the middle of a building.

8] Ju/[鋤](#) describes the ancient Chinese method of patching together broken ceramicware or porcelain before the advent of super glue. Strips made out of flattened copper or iron nails called juzi/[鋤子](#) were used to stitch the cracked pottery shards together. For an example of a porcelain jar repaired in such a way, visit this Baidu page [here](#).

9] The Chinese used here is “mo jianzi qiang caidao” ([磨剪子戥菜刀](#)) but that is probably a typo since the correct characters are “mo jianzi qiang caidao” ([磨剪子鏟菜刀](#)) and refers to the craft involved with grinding and polishing scissors and cleavers used as kitchen knives in order to sharpen their edges. This used to be an ancient profession in China, similar to the wandering [tinkers](#) who mended household utensils in the West.

10] “Ling yang gua jiao” ([羚羊掛角](#)) is a Chinese expression that arose from the mistaken belief that antelopes hung their horns on the trees and slept with their feet off the ground in order to prevent being tracked down and ambushed at night. This idiom is meant to describe someone who thinks outside the box or is out of the ordinary with their actions.

11] “Tian ma xing kong” ([天馬行空](#)), which I have translated literally in text, is a Chinese 4-character couplet that’s used to describe people who are unconstrained and free like the celestial horses, making them unpredictable. It can also reflect negatively on such people since they could be said to not be so grounded in reality. In this case, Xiaohong is referring to the greatness of vision that Xiaobao and Juan-Juan seem to have in their plans and actions whose direction or goal no one else can seem to get a grasp on.

12] “[Naihe Qiao](#)” (奈何橋), which I’ve translated as the Bridge of Helplessness, is a bridge found in the Chinese version of the underworld called “[Diyu](#)” (地獄), which literally means “earth prison.” Any souls that crossed the bridge were greeted by [Meng Po](#) (孟婆), whose name means “Granny Meng,” who served them a soup called “mi hun tang” (迷魂湯) or “drugged soul soup” that would induce amnesia so that they could continue on to their next life without any memories of their previous life or of their time in the underworld. The bridge is similar in concept to the [river Styx](#) that must be crossed by the dead in [Greek mythology](#) while the soup has the river [Lethe](#) as its Greek counterpart. The reason for the bridge’s name in Chinese is because crossing the bridge can’t be helped or avoided.

13] The end table is called a “xiao ji” (小几) and can also be referred to as a tea table or “cha ji” ([茶几](#)). For images on what it looks like, visit this Baidu page [here](#).

14] “Suo yi” ([蓑衣](#)) was a garment made out of rice straw that was water-resistant and was the ancient Chinese form of a raincoat before actual waterproof materials like rubber or plastic were created. The [mino](#) (蓑) is the Japanese version of this clothing.

15] Juan-Juan is quoting a poem by Northern [Song dynasty](#) poet [Su Shi](#) (蘇軾), who is also known as “Su Dongpo” (蘇東坡), which is where the [Hangzhou dish](#) of [Dongpo pork](#) gets its name from. The quote “yi suo yan yu ren ping sheng” ([一蓑煙雨任平生](#)) is from Su Shi’s “Ding Feng Po” 《定風波》 and given the context of the poem, the imagery of the straw raincoat that takes the battering of smoke and rain is likened to facing up to the trials of life with armor-like equanimity.

16] Xiaobao is quoting Southern [Song dynasty](#) poet, [Xin Qiji](#) (辛棄疾). The phrase, “feng liu zong bei yu da feng chui qu” ([風流總被雨打風吹去](#)), is from his poem, “Yong Yu Yue – Jingkou Beigu Ting Huai Gu” 《[永遇樂·京口北固亭懷古](#)》, whose title can be roughly translated as “Eternal Encounter Song – Yearning for the Past at the Northern Pavilion in Jingkou.” He wrote this in 1205 at the location in question as a criticism of [Emperor Wen of Liu Song](#) (劉宋文帝) who he felt didn’t appreciate his talents and contrasts Emperor Wen unfavorably against two men much feted for their greatness who had both been associated with Jingkou (京口), past incarnation of the modern day city of [Xuzhou](#) (徐州市): [Sun Quan](#) (孫權), the founder of the state of [Eastern Wu](#) (東吳) from the [Three Kingdoms](#) period, and [Emperor Wu of Liu Song](#) (劉宋武帝) who founded the [Liu Song dynasty](#) (劉宋朝) and was Emperor Wen’s father. The meaning of the line Xiaobao is quoting when considering the context of the poem is essentially lamenting how heroes who were free like the flowing wind are still not immune to the ravages of time as represented by the rain and wind so their presence or spirit will still disappear (as evidenced by Emperor Wen failing to live up to the memory of his father). So, Xiaobao is probably using hyperbole to claim that he would get sick and died if he went along with the action that Juan-Juan is proposing here. Hopefully, I explained this well enough... ^_^;

17] The “Hanlin Yuan” ([翰林院](#)), which I’ve translated as the [Imperial Academy](#) though the name literally means “Forest of Brushes School,” was an institution founded by [Emperor Xuanzong of Tang](#) that gathered an elite group of scholars who gave interpretations of the classic texts that the [civil exams](#) were based on. Members did secretarial and administrative work for the Emperor and included court painters, diplomatic translators, archivists, as well as scribes for the Imperial edicts or decrees.

[18\]](#) “Xiucai” (秀才), which literally means “distinguished talent,” was the title for those who had passed the [civil exams](#) at the local county level. If their test ranking was high enough, they could also receive a stipend from the government in addition to being able to attend the local equivalent of a state-funded high school (I do not say public because it was not open to the public). This was also the level at which such degree holders started receiving some of the privileges reserved for the scholarly class like not having to kneel in front of the magistrates when appearing in front of them.

[19\]](#) “Qing mei zhu ma” (青梅竹馬) essentially means “childhood sweetheart” with the “green plum” (qingmei/青梅) typically used to refer to the girl and “bamboo horse” (zhuma/竹馬) for the boy in Chinese and is derived from a poem that illustrates such a situation. In cases where its literally meaning is not specifically pointed out and/or no wordplay is involved, I will usually translate this phrase as childhood sweethearts.

[20\]](#) Juan-Juan is quoting the relevant poem to explain the 4-character couplet that means “childhood sweethearts” in Chinese: “郎騎竹馬來，繞床弄青梅，兩小無猜。” The source is “Chang Gan Xing” 《長干行》 by famed [Tang dynasty](#) poet, [Li Bai](#) (李白). It illustrates a young woman’s story of love since her childhood and their parting. The American poet [Ezra Pound](#) later did a translation of this poem and titled it “[The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter](#).”

[21\]](#) In case people are wondering why Song Jing-gong is asking this question, as part and parcel of believing in [ancestor worship](#) and [feng shui](#), Chinese people naturally thought that burying their ancestors in a place that had good feng shui could help grant fortune to them as the ancestral spirits would naturally grow in

strength to be able to bless their descendants. So Song Jing-gong is basically wondering what kind of super powerful feng shui location had the Zhang and Wang family ancestors been buried in to bless these two families with such unnaturally intelligent descendants like Xiaobao and Juan-Juan.

[22\]](#) “Liang cha” ([涼茶](#)) literally means “cold tea” but is known as [herbal tea](#) or tisane in English since they could include other substances like herbs, spices, or plants and are not prepared in the normal way as true teas. Another name would be tea infusion. However, as the name in Chinese suggests, these teas were served chilled or cold in China. To avoid reader confusion, I have translated it literally.

Chapter 28: Who Can Beat The Spicy Sauce Once It Appears

‘In front of me are two little kids who haven’t even been weaned off milk yet. I’m not afraid. I shouldn’t feel fear. Pretending—they’re all pretending. It’s the grownups who’ve taught them to speak like this.’

As Song Jing-gong listened to the words that Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan spoke, taking in the atmosphere when the two kids talked as well as that kind of inner something, he constantly reassured himself to make himself be clear on the matter before his eyes and to disperse the cloudy fog.

“Mister Song, please.” Zhang Xiaobao essentially didn’t even give Song Jing-gong a chance to adjust and seeing Song Jing-gong stare blankly, he picked up the tea and started drinking.

“Xiaobao, the tea is a bit old—pre-festival¹ is still the best.” Wang Juan finished drinking the tea, evaluating it as she smacked her lips twice.

Filled with curiosity, Song Jing-gong also picked up the hot tea to take a sip. He didn’t dare pick up the cold tea as he feared being tricked. As he drank a mouthful of tea, he only felt one sensation—light. There wasn’t any salt or sugar in the flavor and even more, it didn’t have any ginger or scallions to enhance it. It was a bit unpalatable but after a little while, he discovered that he actually found that kind of lightly bitter taste of this tea addicting.

“The method of brewing this tea seems to be different from others?” Song Jing-gong asked, raising his head after he finished the tea.

“That is right. This way of drinking tea is for the sake of drinking while displaying elegance—not for ordinary life and to be used for the sake of culture that isn’t suitable for hardship. For those with money and status, they can use such a method. If it is only for the sake of maintaining the internal organs, then adding salt, ginger, or other such substances would be better. Today, I treat it with elegance; tomorrow morning, perhaps I may abandon it to disuse.” Zhang Xiaobao spoke with a light tone of voice.

“It’s to tell you that doing this is to put on airs. Decent people drink tea because they’re suffering from indigestion after eating. Adding salt is in order to not let the body lack salt. Adding ginger is for the sake of preventing nausea and get rid of chills. For people with no power and money, living is the most important. Of course, when pretending is necessary, they will still pretend—pretending is a part of life.”

Seeing Song Jing-gong go into a daze, Wang Juan gave a ‘translation’ to the side.

Song Jing-gong nodded his head. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand but that he hadn’t thought that tea could actually be used to reflect status. If he had known this earlier, then wouldn’t he have had an additional trick when he was swindling in the past? But this little kid in front of him had a trick that wasn’t use. Could it be that he had already reached a level that he disdained using such a method?

In listening to this little girl's words, what caused him the greatest shock was that last sentence. Pretending is a part of life—how could this come out of the mouth of a little girl who was only a year or so old?

“This Song has received instruction. Wonder if Mister Zhang is willing to teach the way to make this tea? This Song will certainly reciprocate a thousand and a hundredfold.” Song Jing-gong's thinking was crooked as he felt like he had a new way to swindle people.

Not waiting for Zhang Xiaobao to speak, Wang Juan over there had already spoken up: “What can you reciprocate? You owe us money now, ~ne. It's a lot. Several hundred silver taels—how are you going to repay it?”

Upon hearing these words, Song Jing-gong's face changed in expression several times before he finally helplessly exhaled out a breath. He was about to speak when Zhang Xiaobao directly said: “Mister Song, I'm calling you Mister today not because you have an honorary title. Dog fart of an honorary title! If I wanted to, I could be your equal in standing before the age of 4. It is because though you have swindled many, you have never targeted ordinary people.

What you did previously, I approve of it all. Save for your actions during the chick hatching matter, which disappointed me. Could it be that with a large enough profit, you'll forget your beginnings?”

Hearing Zhang Xiaobao's words, Song Jing-gong trembled. It was really like what this kid had said. At that moment, he had actually been moved toward wickedness and hadn't been the same as what he had decided to be in the past.

"Many thanks, Mister Zhang. But the method of the tea leaves..." Song Jing-gong still wanted to keep swindling.

"Song Jing-gong, how can you disappoint me so, ~ne? Except for this kind of—as I see it—lowbrow swindling technique, you don't know of anything else? Harming people while benefiting yourself to make money, that's the low road. Helping people while benefiting yourself is the petty road; benefiting the nation and its people while making money is the great road. Are you just prepared to hang around on the low road?"

Zhang Xiaobao, seeing that Song Jing-gong was still thinking of using deceptive methods to earn money, was genuinely disappointed. If swindling was really needed, then would you, Song Jing-gong, even be needed?

Song Jing-gong put down the tea bowl as he gazed at the little kid in front of him and suddenly felt a kind of awkwardness, especially with the contemptuous look and expression of disappointment on this little kid's face. When he looked over at the little girl next to him, she actually had an appearance of hating that the iron hadn't turned into steel.²

Song Jing-gong felt like when he faced the two kids, it was like they were his past test officials and he couldn't help feeling kind of lost.

“Wonder which type Mister Zhang belongs to?” Song Jing-gong still wasn’t willing to give up as he asked again.

“This point doesn’t need Xiaobao to speak of it, I can tell you. Not to the left, not to the right, and not to the middle—that is moderation.”³ When Wang Juan said these words, she turned her head, not willing to look at Song Jing-gong anymore.

At this moment, Song Jing-gong really was won over. He already understood that for these two kids to swindle him to death, the energy needed to blow the dust off wouldn’t even need to be expended. How were these even children? They clearly were already masters of themselves.

“Mister Zhang, Jing-gong is dull-witted and hopes that many doubts will be answered in the future.” Song Jing-gong humbled himself.

“Answer what doubts? Listen more, see more, do more, think more, ask more—that is learning. By my side, I lack an advisor⁴ so whenever I do anything, there’s always something that’s overlooked. I wonder if Mister Song...?” Zhang Xiaobao didn’t speak but implied the last words.

“Learning has no end;⁵ those who reach it, teach.”⁶ From now on, Jing-gong shall do as Little Mister orders.” Song Jing-gong had already figured it out. If some of the sentences before could be taught by people, then the following words in reply didn’t have

any other people who could teach it. Even if Zhuge⁷ was alive, it wouldn't be possible. Everything had all been said according to the will of these two kids themselves.

These two kids weren't like ordinary people. Moreover, he himself was still weighed down with debt; his life and death was entirely based on their one word. If he didn't seek service with them at this time, then he'd have to wait till when—did he really want to make them take those actions of blood and iron⁸ after causing them disappointment?

Thinking of this, Song Jing-gong already understood that they didn't wish for him to have to die and only wanted a person who could handle their affairs. Song Jing-gong felt that working for the victor wasn't disgraceful. As for culture, it came whenever they opened their mouths. With swindling, several of him added together would still lead to a fate of bankruptcy and ruin.⁹

“Really? Gaining a person like Mister Song, it is like I have gained a Guan Zhong.¹⁰ From now on, I will have to trouble Mister Song a lot.” The overtures that should be made, Zhang Xiaobao still made.

“Little Mister, it would be better to call me Zijin¹¹ in the following days.” Song Jing-gong said.

At this time, Wang Juan also turned her head around and said: “So Mister Song's style name¹² is Zijin: ‘Blue, blue is your lapel that sways, sways my heart.’¹³ Since you possess a heart that worships the common people, then you'll have to work hard.

Xiaobao, hand the matter of the soybean oil to Zijin.”

Song Jing-gong was really speechless. Just saying out loud one style name from himself here and a one year old kid immediately recited the poem there. When he looked over at these two kids again, no matter how he looked at it, they were such a matched pair. If they were like this around a year old, what would they be like after growing up?

“Fine. [Older] Brother Zijin, since it’s like this, then I’ll have to trouble you. I wish to use soybeans to make some oil and trade it to the peasants to eat those carrots that you brought over—that is, the sweet plants. You sold this stuff a bit expensively. It isn’t worth 1 wen [cash] for 1 catty but 1 wen [cash] for 2 catties is about right.”

At this time, Zhang Xiaobao also spoke up, wishing to lower the price of the sold carrots in half.

Song Jing-gong felt like he himself was like a fool as he shook his head: “Not possible. I bought it at 1 wen [cash] for 20 catties. Here, there’s basically no one who’d eat them.”

“When dealing with us, there is only whether you wish to do it and not whether it’s possible or not.” Wang Juan said with certainty.

“All right. Then, how to make the oil? Soybeans have oil, too? To light lamps with?” Song Jing-gong had to admit that they were more formidable than he was.

“Not for lighting lamps. For eating—same as with lard. First, collect the soybeans. We can talk about the rest later.” Wang Juan said in interruption.

Song Jing-gong naturally wouldn't protest as things would be fine as long as he followed their orders. Concerned with the matter of collecting the soybeans, he took his leave before he left.

Five days later, the sunlight was bright.

Carrying a basket in his hands, Erniu returned to find Zhang Xiaobao.

“Little Mister, the sauce has come out. This is what you [honorific] wanted. See what it's like?” Erniu took out dozens of small jars from inside the basket and placed them in front of Zhang Xiaobao.

“[Older] Brother Zijin, know what this is?” Zhang Xiaobao smiled after seeing the objects as he spoke to Song Jing-gong who was beside him.

Song Jing-gong looked and said: “I know—soybean paste.”

“Bring the flat cakes¹⁴ over.” Zhang Xiaobao said to Yingtao next to him.

Yingtao had already prepared them in advance over there. For these past few days, she had been preparing the flat cakes day after day so upon hearing his voice, she immediately left to retrieve and place them in front of Zhang Xiaobao.

“[Older] Brother Zijin, please smear the paste on top of the flat cake.” Zhang Xiaobao said while handing over a pair of chopsticks.

Song Jing-gong uncertainly followed along with what Zhang Xiaobao asked and then looked at Zhang Xiaobao. When he saw this little kid make an eating motion, Song Jing-gong didn't hesitate one bit and directly placed it in his mouth to take a big bite.

“Delicious, how was this stuff made? Little Mister, could it be that you made it?” After eating a mouthful, Song Jing-gong said a sentence to Zhang Xiaobao before eating the entire flat cake.

Just as he finished eating, Xiaohong there served up a bowl of chicken egg and spinach soup with scallions that had been stir-fried in oil floating on top. Drinking one sip left a fragrant aftertaste in his mouth.

“Little Mister, this stuff was made by you?” Song Jing-gong smacked his lips twice as he asked disbelievingly.

“Not me, it was Erniu. The soybeans have been more or less collected, right? From now on, you'll sell this kind of paste sauce. I'll give you several recipes for dishes using this kind of paste sauce. At the very least, you will sell 1 catty for 50 wen [cash].”

Zhang Xiaobao also used a finger to dab up some sauce to taste it as he spoke to Song Jing-gong.

“No, that’s not it. It was Little Mister. Little Mister told me how to make it. It wasn’t me. It really wasn’t me.” Erniu had actually not tasted this sauce at all as once it had been made, he had brought it over. So seeing Little Mister credit him for the work, he vigorously shook his head in denial.

Song Jing-gong, seeing the two people’s expressions and the words that they spoke, recalled the taste in his mouth once again as he said: “Little Mister, I, Song Jing-gong, really do admit defeat today. I really do. There’s credit that you don’t claim and you can still make this kind of delicious item. You can relax; I’ll sell it at 100 wen [cash] per catty for you.”

“Don’t. If you really sell it that expensively, then that would be cheating me. You can only sell it at 50 wen [cash] for 1 catty. Wait until I’ve produced the soybean oil and it’s been stir-fried in oil afterwards—then, we can sell it for 100 wen [cash]. We’re doing legitimate business. We don’t need to swindle.”

Zhang Xiaobao, upon seeing Song Jing-gong’s appearance, knew what he was thinking and instantly rejected this suggestion. Then, looking at Erniu, he said: “Now, I’m giving you a new mission. Add the soybean bits [douban] inside the sauce. Categorize this and the previous one into two kinds of sauces. Remember to keep it secret.”

“Little Mister, you [honorific] rest assured as I, Erniu, will certainly complete this matter. I’ll go then.” After he finished

speaking, Erniu turned around and left.

Song Jing-gong used his hand to scoop up some meat from inside the sauce to place it on his tongue as he asked: “Why is there a special flavor? It seems to be spicy.”

“It’s the same as that formula for hatching chicks that you had bought. You always need something better in order to sell something worse.” Zhang Xiaobao said, smiling.

Notes:

[1\]](#) Juan-Juan says “ming qian” (明前) in Chinese here, which literally means “before light” and refers to “ming qian cha” (明前茶) or “before light tea” that itself is a shorthand name for tea that was picked before the [Qingming Festival](#) (清明節) as it is believed that tea leaves picked afterward don’t compare in taste to the tea leaves picked before the festival. Therefore, pre-festival tea leaves tend to be exponentially more expensive and valued than tea leaves picked post-festival. Juan-Juan stating that the tea is too old means that the tea leaves were picked later as they had time to grow more and thus, are not as tender as they could have been if they had been picked earlier.

[2\]](#) “Heng tie bu cheng gang” (恨鐵不成鋼) is an expression in Chinese that uses the analogy of iron and the hard work required to turn it into steel as the metallurgic technology wasn’t advanced enough back then to guarantee that iron could be successfully forged into steel. So someone who hates that the iron hadn’t turned into steel is usually metaphorically expressing frustration

that someone with great potential is wasting it. This idiom is especially apt if the person so frustrated is the metaphorical smith who has put a lot of effort into nurturing or transforming the wasted talent that is being likened to the iron ore that failed to turn into steel.

3] “Zhong yang” (中庸) translates to “moderation” and refers to the [Confucian](#) philosophy, “zhong yang zhi dao” (中庸之道), which means “path of moderation” though it has been translated as “[Doctrine of the Mean](#)” in English. It is also the title of one of the [Four Books](#) of Confucianism. It shares remarkable similarities to the Greek philosophical idea of the “[Golden Mean](#)” as posed by [Aristotle](#) and the [Buddhist](#) concept of the [Middle Way](#) or “zhong dao” (中道) in that all three approaches basically argue for avoiding excess or extremes and sticking to the middle.

4] “Mu liao” (幕僚) roughly means “aide” but it is a term that doesn’t refer to the typical peon assistant or aide and has an added connotation of an advisory background role that is granted a great deal of independence and trust in order to work toward their leader’s goal. For the sake of reference, the title of White House Chief of Staff is translated into Chinese as “Bai Gong Mu Liao Zhang” (白宮幕僚長) as the White House staff are essentially the President’s personal advisory aides who’d help with anything that impacted the President as an individual politician versus the national advisors who would give advice on official national policy but wouldn’t normally deal with the personal politics of the President. So Xiaobao is basically asking Song Jing-gong to not only be his assistant but also act as an independent personal advisor. This term comes up a lot in historical Chinese fiction because these “mu liao” could be collected into a group to become an ancient form of think tank or advisory team for their lord and acted as key players if there were any backroom dealings or

conspiracies to scheme over and put into action. For example, one of the most famous geniuses in Chinese history and culture, [Zhuge Liang](#) (諸葛亮), was essentially one of these for [Liu Bei](#) (劉備) before he was promoted to Chancellor after the state of [Shu Han](#) (蜀漢) was founded during the [Three Kingdoms](#) period.

5] “Xue wu zhi jing” (學無止境) is a 4-character couplet that can be traced back to a Qing dynasty text, “Wen Shuo” 《問說》 by Liu Kai (劉開). Likely, the author didn’t realize that this was anachronistic so let’s just pretend Song Jing-gong is unwittingly ahead of his time...

6] The 4-character idiom “dazhe wei shi” (達者為師) is another one of those mnemonic phrases that don’t make complete sense until you consider the entire context that it is taken from. Taken literally, it means “the one who reaches it becomes a teacher,” which is a bit nonsensical. The full sentence is “學無前後, 達者為先” and is from the [Tang dynasty](#) text, “Shi Shuo” 《師說》 by [Neo-Confucian](#) poet [Han Yu](#) (韓愈). The latter half makes more sense when you combine it with the former half’s meaning, which translates to “learning has no first or last.” This expression basically espouses the thinking that those who are the best or most skilled should be respected regardless of seniority, an idea that is slightly heretical to the respect given to the age hierarchy in traditional [Confucianism](#) as it encourages the possibility of an older or more senior person deferring to a younger or more junior person if they possess the necessary learning or skill. Thus, it’s essentially promoting a version of “survival of the fittest” within scholarly circles in that the most learned ones should become teachers, regardless of age or seniority. “Dazhe” (達者) became a synonym for “capable one or expert” because of this quote even though it technically just means “arrived one.” Song Jing-gong essentially modified this sentence so that the meaning is slightly

changed to show that he is acknowledging the children's fitness to be his master and teacher.

7] “Zhuge” (諸葛) is the surname of [Zhuge Liang](#) (諸葛亮), who is commonly considered the epitome of genius and intelligence in Asia due to the essential role that he played as the strategist for [Liu Bei](#) (劉備) and the state of [Shu Han](#) (蜀漢) during the Three Kingdoms period as well as the inventions attributed to him. This status is also helped by the fact that the novelization of the historical events of the [Three Kingdoms](#) is one of the [Four Great Classical Novels](#) of [Chinese literature](#), the [Romance of the Three Kingdoms](#) or “San Guo Yanyi” 《三國演義》, that took artistic license to expound greatly on Zhuge Liang's cunning and exploits. It is easy to know that Zhuge Liang is being referenced when just using the surname since it is rare to have 2-character surnames (also known as [compound surnames](#)) in China, much less the particular one of [Zhuge](#).

8] The Chinese used here of “tie xue shou duan” (鐵血手段), I translated literally. I am footnoting it because I had to suppress the urge to translate it as blood and steel since steel is the metal mentioned whenever an euphemism for weapons is used in English whereas iron is the metal that always shows up in the Chinese language as a symbol for weapons or war. This is likely because the Chinese literary customs ossified and forever tied iron with war, even after the Chinese had already discovered ways to produce steel although steel wasn't produced in enough mass quantities to have entire armies outfitted in them. This is probably similar to how English idioms will still mention swords in metaphors even though they are no longer in common use, having been superseded in their role by guns.

[9\]](#) I translated “qing jia dang chan” (傾家蕩產) as “bankruptcy and ruin” but it actually literally translates to “collapse of house, rocking of production,” which basically means loss of home (homelessness) and financial loss or instability.

[10\]](#) [Guan Zhong](#) (管仲) was the chancellor of the state of [Qi](#) (齊) during the [Spring and Autumn period](#) who was thought to be the ideal minister and was greatly praised by [Confucius](#). His efforts made his state the most powerful of the feudal states in China at the time.

[11\]](#) “Zijin” (子衿) isn’t actually a real word but is the title of a poem. So this would be similar to someone taking on an internet alias or pseudonym based on a song or book. Zi/子 is a multi-purpose character that has a variety of meanings depending on the situation and in this case, it is likely acting as a placeholder word for person or individual. Jin/衿 refers to the collar or lapel that diagonally traverses the front of a [Hanfu](#) (漢服) garment. Because of the export of Chinese clothing styles over time through the [Sinosphere](#), you can see this collar style reflected in the design of the traditional [Japanese kimono](#) (きもの/着物) or [Korean hanbok](#) (한복/韓服) as well.

[12\]](#) Zi/字 literally means “character” but in this case, it is referring to the [style or courtesy name](#) that an educated man assumes upon reaching his majority at the age of 20. Biao/表 (meaning appearance) is also another way to refer to this name in Chinese. This style or courtesy name was reserved for intimates or close friends to use in ancient China while those who weren’t, used the person’s titles or surname to address them. A person’s [given name](#) was hardly ever used except for in legal documentations since even family members tended to either use nicknames and pet

names or family titles to address them by, a practice that was likely a culmination of various [Chinese naming customs](#) and an extension of the thinking that doing so would possibly draw too much attention from malevolent spirits who would be able to identify the person by their [true name](#).

[13\]](#) The quote of “qing qing zijin, you you wo xin” ([青青子衿, 悠悠我心](#)) comes from an anthology of classical [Chinese poetry](#) called “Shijin” [《詩經》](#) or the [Classic of Poetry](#)—namely, it is from a poem titled “Zijin” (子衿) from the “Zheng Feng” (鄭風) or the Odes to [Zheng](#) section of the “Airs of the States” (Guo Feng/國風) part of the compilation. The poem’s subject is about a man waiting in the upper story of a building for his close friend or lover (there has been some historical debate over the actual nature of the relationship). This particular phrase was then quoted by the [Three Kingdoms](#) period warlord and founder of the state of [Cao Wei](#) (曹魏), [Cao Cao](#) (曹操), in a well known [yuefu](#) (樂府) style poem of his that he composed right before the [Battle of Red Cliffs](#) (赤壁之戰) that was titled “Duan Ge Xing” [《短歌行》](#) or [Short Song Style](#) in order to express his passionate longing for collecting talented people under his flag. For those wondering why it sounds like it could be a song lyric, it is because yuefu style poems are composed to resemble music.

[14\]](#) “[Bing](#)” (餅) translates to “cake, bread, biscuit, or cookies” depending on the context. Because the food item in question here is a flattened and round cake made out of unleavened dough that is similar to flatbreads and pancakes (in fact, [scallion pancakes](#) are a fried type of these), I chose to translate this food item as “flat cake” in English. For other similar foods, compare Mexican [tortillas](#), Indian [roti](#), or French [crêpes](#).

Chapter 29: People & Money In Position About To Takeoff

Song Jing-gong carefully observed Zhang Xiaobao before he rolled up a flat cake, slowly eating it bite by bite as if savoring it and yet, not as if he was simply savoring this flat cake and spicy sauce.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, the two of them didn't bother him, either, as they tore off a thin piece of flat cake there, dipping it into the sauce before they carefully started eating.

"The taste is still a bit poor." Wang Juan licked her fingertips as she smacked her lips twice.

"Unh, I also think so. It wasn't fried using oil so it's considered raw paste sauce. Wait till it's been fried and it'll be better." Zhang Xiaobao nodded as he agreed with her.

"In a while, use oil to fry it for a bit. We'll eat it for lunch. Send some to my family, too. Yesterday night, my mom even sent us peaches, ~ne." Wang Juan said once she had stuffed that little bit of flat cake into her belly.

Over here, Zhang Xiaobao had also just finished eating and nodded: "Send it, definitely have to send it. But without the soybean oil, the flavor is worse by quite a lot. Last time when we went to the kitchen, I saw that there was some beef tallow over there. Use that, then. Let's think of a way for when an ox can fall down dead so we can use the beef to make sauce with."

“Have to keep them for plowing the land, ~ne. Killing the ones on the manor isn’t allowed. Buying an old ox to kill it would be cheaper.” Wang Juan added there.

In this moment, Song Jing-gong’s inner heart was filled with mixed feelings.¹ From the words of that manservant who had just left, he’d already discovered that this sauce had been produced by the little kid in front of him. From the start, he himself had really been ridiculous for still wanting to swindle them. Look at them—they could think of one after another idea for legitimate business.

His loss wasn’t a bit unwarranted—they were basically not even on the same level. One year old, ~ah. Could it be that they were the reincarnation of saints?² When he listened to the words that these two kids were saying again, how were these children who hadn’t even been weaned off milk? They were clearly just like adults.

No wonder Yingtao had such a pride-filled face whenever she spoke of Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan. If he himself had such masters, he presumed he’d be the same way, too. All right, he wouldn’t argue from now on and just be an aide to this little kid. By following him, perhaps he’d see even more splendid things.

Just as Song Jing-gong was thinking on matters, Zhang Xiaobao had already instructed Xiaohong to go to the kitchens to get some things. She had just brought them over when Song Jing-gong was finished with his thoughts, only to see Zhang Xiaobao place some scallions and cucumber slices on top of the flat cake and then smear on some sauce before saying to him:

“[Older] Brother Zijin, try this. In the future, I’m prepared to sell this stuff to every restaurant and snack shop. Unh, just selling the sauce—if it’s just a little more expensive, people can still accept it. After all, wait until after we’ve extracted the soybean oil. Then, only our family will have it. Juan-Juan and I are still little and can’t eat so many things. [Older] Brother Zijin, please.”

The flat cake was small. Song Jing-gong hadn’t eaten his full after having two, much less after having not eaten anything at all since yesterday afternoon. He was hungry right now, ~ne. So right then, he wasn’t polite at all as he accepted the flat cake and gobbled it down in two or three gulps. Exhaling with satisfaction, he moved to roll up another two cakes and eat them as he said:

“Little Mister, from now on, wherever you [honorific] say to go, then Zijin will go there. As for that Noteworthy House, Little Mister, please don’t bother with it. The store is small but can still support three families of people, ~ne.”

“What is Zijin talking about? The store affairs naturally are up to Zijin to decide. I’m so little, how can I manage so many things? These flat cakes are tasty. In the future, I’ll have people get a small stall specifically to sell them—just like spring platters,³ only I know how to add some vegetables that no one else knows how to make yet.”

Zhang Xiaobao looked at Song Jing-gong and seeing that he didn’t seem to be pretending, explained a bit more. He wasn’t afraid of people deceiving him as he wasn’t lacking in the ability to keep his subordinates in check.

Song Jing-gong was still eating over there. This kind of stuff was really too good to eat as it was delicious and spicy, making him want to eat more the more that he ate. Only until he really couldn't continue eating did he stop and then, looking at the two kids facing him, he said: "All right, I'm full so I'll leave now to go collect the soybeans."

Having said this, Song Jing-gong stood up to leave but Zhang Xiaobao suddenly spoke up: "Hold on. It's raining hard and the wind is cold outside; Zijin will need to take care of your health. Xiaohong, is the wine with the added ginger strips warmed up yet? Serve it to Zijin to fend off the cold. I'll have to trouble Zijin—Juan-Juan and I are still too small so we can't do a great many things. Everything will depend on Zijin handling it and exhausting himself out there so Juan-Juan and I give our thanks."

As they spoke, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan saluted in gratitude to Song Jing-gong together as they used those small hands to tremblingly carry and place the wine in front of Song Jing-gong.

Hearing this, Song Jing-gong looked at those weak little hands and accepted the warmed wine. Not having yet drunken it, ~ne, he already felt that his heart had been warmed up. With a tilt of his head, he drank the wine down to the dregs and then, cupping his hands in salute to Zhang Xiaobao: "Thou treats this one like a gentleman of the state so this one must repay thee as a gentleman of the state.⁴ Farewell."

Having said these words, Song Jing-gong turned and left, not

even using an umbrella as he directly charged into the torrential rain with that pair of steady and powerful legs.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan followed along until the doorway until Song Jing-gong's silhouette had disappeared before turning around to return. But suddenly seeing Xiaohong over there with red-rimmed eyes, they asked in surprise: "Xiaohong, why are you like this? Were your eyes burned by the ginger? Quick, go use water to rinse it out."

"No, I'm fine. I just feel like my heart's been comforted. Mister treats people so well—no matter if it's Yingtao, Shiliu, me, or that Mister Song—Mister treats them all sincerely. For Xiaohong to be sent to Mister's side is Xiaohong's fortune."

Xiaohong shook her head there but she hadn't even finished speaking, ~ne, and the tears had already started falling. Don't just look at how her age wasn't that big, she also knew of the coldness and warmth of human emotion.⁵ Little Mister was not only smart, he also treated people well—to serve such a master must certainly be due to the good deeds from a previous life.

"Don't cry, don't cry. The good days are still yet to come, ~ne! There's still flat cakes left so you can eat them while they're still hot and help me try out the taste to see if it's still missing anything." Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan exchanged a look as they inwardly sighed. The people here were so good, ~ah.

"Unh, tasty. The things Mister makes are so tasty. When I smelled the aroma just now, I knew." Xiaohong wiped her eyes as she enthusiastically nodded her head and helped the two children

back on top of the couch, already starting with her praises though she hadn't eaten it yet.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan didn't make a sound either as they watched Xiaohong eat three flat cakes in a row before they said: "Xiaohong, wait until the rain's stopped as you still have other things to do. You'll need to find people to dig in that lowland area by the river on the manor. Also, open up a hole in the river and channel the water flow into it. The manor needs to raise a lot more ducks and geese as well as plant some lotuses. Once it's winter, we'll have more types of vegetables."

"Unh, Xiaohong understands. Little Mister, rest assured. There are quite a few people on the manor. As long as a meal is covered, they'll come over to work. Tomorrow, I'll go digging." Xiaohong said in confirmation.

But Wang Juan shook her head: "Not only will you need to cover a meal but you will also need to give a wage. You decide on the number and return to get it. In the future, the two manors of Zhang and Wang will also be opening up a general goods store here to let the people of the manor do their purchases and trading more easily. It's not for the sake of making money but it's so the people of the manor can walk a step or two less."

"Little Miss is righteous and kind; Xiaohong gives thanks on behalf of the elder patriarchs⁶ of the manor." Xiaohong had eaten her fill so she was full of motivated energy. When she thought of the days to come, she felt like the rain outside was also so joyous.

The next day, the white clouds were puffy, the sunlight was

brightly shining, and the river was clear as the children happily played within it.

The laborers of the manor had all been summoned by Xiaohong. Plotting out the area and not even caring about the muddiness in the aftermath of the rain there, they brought their tools and started working, each and every one all acting as if they didn't know what fatigue was.

At this time, Xiaohong had people set up the big pot to the side that was simmering fragrantly tasty large bones. There were also people making the dough in preparation for pan-frying⁷ the flat cakes. The sauce had also been placed to the side as the shredded pork was stir-fried using oil. When it was time to eat, it just needed to be returned to the pan to add some chopped scallion rolled up inside the flat cake so the taste would be even better. This had been due to Wang Juan's guidance since she loved shredded meat with * sauce.⁸

"[Older] Brothers and uncles, work hard. You certainly need to do justice to Little Mister's 3 wen [cash] in daily wages. Wait until noon as there'll be enough big flat cakes rolled up with vegetables to eat." Xiaohong stood to the side as she yelled—she even knew to drum up morale.

The people working could already smell the fragrant aroma rising from the pot so while they gulped down their saliva and vigorously shoveled, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan was also standing nearby as they observed. This could be considered a kind of method to rally the people's hearts.

“From now on, the days will be better. Xiaobao, I want to transform the two manors of Zhang and Wang into an otherworldly paradise.⁹ The elderly will be provided for;¹⁰ the young will receive an education;¹¹ every family can build new homes; every person can eat their fill and be warmly clothed—is that hard?” Wang Juan said with a face full of yearning.

“If it’s only two manors, it’s not hard. But I’m prepared to expand this place a bit later on so the things to manage would be a lot, ~ne. It’ll be necessary to cultivate some talent. What we need to do is to give them hope and confidence. By that time, you can train the footmen.” Zhang Xiaobao was also making calculations there; he also wanted to let the people of the manor live well.

“Little Mister, do you [honorific] still want to eat toads?” Just when Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were both imagining the future, a child in the river built up the courage to ask this.

Zhang Xiaobao knew that these children wanted to get some benefits in exchange so nodding and then, shaking his head: “Want to eat but not toads. You guys get me some river snails. In a while when it’s time to eat, you guys can also eat, too—you can even take home a portion.”

Once Zhang Xiaobao said this, the children all cheered and one after another, they plunged headlong into the water and started to spread out to catch river snails. They all knew what was cooking inside the pot and that shredded meat which had already been stir-fried. To eat a portion themselves and then bring home another portion simply through getting some river snails, it was really too easy.

“Xiaobao, there are parasites in the river snails. I heard that there were people who ate it and worms grew in their brain.” Wang Juan was a little averse to this stuff.

“No fear. When we go back, use some clean water with some salt added to store them in. Use boiling water to scald them twice over and then, dress them using parsley, garlic, and scallions to give to my dad to eat as wine appetizers. We’ll give a portion to your family as well. We’ll just drink a bit of soup. That stuff is tough so we won’t be able to chew it.” Zhang Xiaobao had already thought it through on how to make them.

“Then, we’ll eat them tomorrow. Let’s keep them for today and have the river snails expel the stuff in their stomachs first before talking about it. You, hurry up with bakery cakes. Otherwise, nothing can be eaten with us like this.” Wang Juan was dismayed whenever she thought of their current age.

The children moved quickly and within 2 quarter-hours, they’d already grabbed a large bowl full of river snails. After having people use a wooden bowl to store and keep them in to send back home, they found Xiaohong and had her also prepare food for the children when it was time for lunch. Then, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan went back to start training.

In the morning, Erniu got up very early and ate some porridge. Together with his older brother Daniu, they brought that small jar filled with the spicy sauce and found a carriage to leave for Sanshui County. Because it was adjacent to a river that wasn’t considered too small, there was a lot of traffic there and there were also quite

a few hotels and such. Today, Erniu was ready to go sell the sauce.

For the sake of being able to sell it for a good price, Erniu continued to follow Little Mister's instructions by pan-frying some flat cakes and bringing some chopped scallions along with him. Hurrying along the road, they finally arrived at Sanshui County when it was nearly noon.

"[Younger] Brother, how do we sell it? Do we need to yell out our pitches?"¹² Daniu wasn't as clever as Erniu for he was rather simple and honest so when they arrived, he didn't know what to do.

"No need, Little Mister already planned for this. Let's go. Drive the carriage to Waterview House¹³ over there. They and the Hundred-Flavored Pavilion¹⁴ next door are the two largest restaurants in the county. They're both competing over customers so there's no fear that they won't buy." Erniu recalled Little Mister's words to find two competing restaurants to sell to so he had set his eyes on Sanshui County's two landmark restaurants.

When the carriage had stopped in front of the Waterview House, Erniu and Daniu jumped down from the carriage separately while carrying their things before walking inside. By the entrance, an employee¹⁵ had already come over to arrange for the carriage's parking spot before leading who he assumed to be two dining customers inside, walking as he talked.

"Would both respected guests like to drink wine or check in? According to the restaurant owner,¹⁶ the head chef of one's

business has studied under an Imperial Chef.”¹⁷

“Unh, having studied under an Imperial Chef is good, ~ah. Is your noble owner in? Find a single room on the second floor. The two of us have some matters to discuss with your noble owner.” Today, Erniu was dressed well so he was emboldened as he held his chest high and used what he thought were the most elegant words with the employee.

“He’s in, he’s in. The two of you [honorific], please go upstairs; this little one will go and invite the restaurant owner over here now.” The employee didn’t know what the two of them wished to do, either. But seeing that they had requested a single room on the second floor, he respectfully invited them upstairs. Then, waiting until the two of them had entered the room, he called over another employee to serve them as he ran to go find the restaurant owner.

The newly arrived employee served tea before standing ready to the side. Erniu and Daniu were afraid of spending money so they basically didn’t order any food as they sat there and waited. After around the duration of the span of an incense stick,¹⁸ the owner of the Waterview House hurriedly rushed over here. He wasn’t surprised either upon seeing the two men waiting there as he politely greeted them: “Oneself¹⁹ is the owner of the Waterview House and didn’t know for what matter that both noble personages are calling about. Let’s drink tea, drink tea.”

Erniu was a little nervous. After all, this was his first time dealing with the owner of a big restaurant. So using the method that Little Mister had taught him, he slowly inhaled two deep breaths as he silently chanted that he could do it before he felt a bit better. Then,

along with his older brother, he placed the item on top of the table and flipped open that fine silk covering it before taking out that jar of soybean paste sauce.

“Coming here today was to invite Owner to try this item.” As he spoke, Erniu prepared that still hot flat cake as he coated it with a layer of spicy sauce on top and then placed scallions inside, using chopsticks to roll it up bit by bit.

After this was done, he made another two to share with his older brother. Picking up one for himself, he said: “Please, Owner.”

Upon saying this, Erniu and Daniu directly started to eat in order to show the restaurant owner that there was no poison. Besides, the two of them was also rather hungry as they had only that little bit of porridge to fill them up with since morning till now.

The restaurant owner looked at the two men eating in front of him there, then glanced at this flat cake placed close by himself and understood what these two men came over to do. But with this stuff, he could make it after just one look so why split some of the benefits with other people? After thinking on it, he still picked up the flat cake to take a bite.

Once the bite of flat cake entered his mouth, the restaurant owner was immediately surprised. What was this sauce? It was delicious and there was even a kind of fresh, spicy flavor. No wonder these two men dared come to his place here to sell stuff. So it was like that. Thinking of this, the restaurant owner put down the flat cake that he was holding.

“It’s all right. It’s edible. Leave this sauce’s recipe behind. I can give you two 200 wen [cash].”

Erniu and Daniu froze as they thought of the words that Little Mister had said when they left and had even more respect for Little Mister in their hearts. Even this could be predicted.

Right then, Erniu and Daniu got up simultaneously, putting away the flat cakes that hadn’t been rolled up and the sauce before turning around to leave. As he walked by, Erniu said: “As expected, Owner knows his wares. Since it’s like that, the two of us will first go to that Hundred-Flavored Pavilion to dine, then. We’ll return to speak of the recipe in detail with Owner after.”

“Hold on! Since the two of you have come here, how can you go elsewhere to eat? Liuzi, [20](#) quickly, have the head chef in the back make the signature dishes to send over here. I’ll accompany the two noble guests at their meal.” Upon hearing this, the restaurant owner immediately knew that they weren’t stupid. So seeing that the two of them were about to leave, he hurriedly intercepted them and invited them back.

Notes:

[1\]](#) The Chinese idiom describing Song Jing-gong’s feelings is “wu wei za chen” ([五味雜陳](#)), which means “five flavors, varied (and) old.” The Chinese defined the five flavors as sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, and salty. Since the flavors can tend to be associated with different emotions, this is an indirect way of saying a person

feeling many different types of emotions that run the gamut in taste.

2] “Sheng ren” (聖人) literally translates to “divine person” in Chinese and is usually translated to “sage, saint” in English. More specifically, it can be how the Christian saints or martyrs are referred to in both Chinese and Japanese (at least in Kanji form though the pronunciation will obviously be different). However, outside of the Judeo-Christian context, “sheng ren” (聖人) has had a long tradition of being used to as a label for personages that have been elevated to a demi-god status, if not totally divine level, within the Chinese culture though the divinity is usually metaphorical. Thus, this term can come up in [Daoism](#) and can also be used for greatly revered ancestors or previous generations that were spiritual predecessors such as [Confucius](#) who is considered a spiritual teacher to all of the scholars who claim to be students of the classic texts. Because I previously translated xian/仙 as “sage or immortal” and I wanted to emphasize the reverence accorded to “sheng ren” (聖人), I have chosen to translate this term as “saint.”

3] The name for “[chun pan](#)” (春盤) is derived from a custom that became widespread during the [Tang](#) and [Song](#) dynasties where [spring pancakes](#) or “chun bing” (春餅) and raw vegetables were eaten together after the start of the spring, which was marked as “[Lichun](#)” (立春) on the [traditional Chinese calendar](#), as a way to welcome spring. Because they were typically served on platters to guests in an arrangement similar to a [hors d'oeuvre](#) tray, they were called “spring platters.” Spring pancakes share the same concept as [spring rolls](#) or “chun juan” (春卷), which originate from the [Han dynasty](#), and sometimes depending on the region, they are synonyms for the same dish.

4] The language Song Jing-gong uses here is deliberately archaic, which you can tell when the Chinese gets super condensed and compact. The Chinese he uses here of “君以國士待某, 某必以國士報之” is a modification of a quote by [Yu Rang](#) (豫讓) from the [state of Jin](#) (晉) during the [Spring and Autumn period](#) as recorded in the Biographies of Assassins (刺客列傳), the 86th biography written by [Sima Qian](#) (司馬遷) in the [Records of the Grand Historian](#) (史記). Yu Rang is well known in Chinese history as an assassin but he didn't do it for a living as his assassinations were motivated by revenge in a situation similar to the one of the [47 ronin](#) of Japan. Yu Rang had been an underappreciated vassal of the Fan (范氏) and Zhonghang (中行氏) clans who defected in service to the Count Zhi (智伯), Xun Yao (荀瑤) who did greatly appreciate Yu Rang's abilities. By the way, the names are going to be confusing because this is during a time period when surnames, clan names, style names, title names, nicknames, and given names could all be used interchangeably without any notice—especially if the person was a member of the nobility—so it is all very headache-inducing even for native Chinese speakers because one person could be referred to by a dozen various names much less when you consider that history usually had more than just one named noble figure involved. During the [Warring States](#) and the Spring and Autumn period of China, the surnames and clan names hadn't been set in stone yet so nobility could often take on different surnames or clan names within just one generation and they were not treated as uniformly as surnames or clan names are now. To clarify, Yu Rang's third and last sovereign lord, Count Zhi (智伯), is known under MANY different names, which I will attempt to explain so it is less confusing but it is a rather detailed explanation so I'm very sorry for the length of this footnote. Though Count Zhi is listed on Baidu as Xun Yao (荀瑤), he is hardly ever referred to by that surname of Xun (荀) and was only retroactively given that surname due to modern sensibilities because he was the son of Xun Shen (荀申). Confusing the matter further is that Count Zhi's surname (xing/姓)

was Ji (姬), which is actually also hardly used as a surname though it is one of the most ancient Chinese surnames, while his clan name (shi/氏) was Zhi (智), which is a homophone for the character meaning “to know” or zhi/知 so he can also be referred to as the “Count of Knowing” (Zhibo/知伯). This pun on his title was common enough that reputable historic records would address him by this pseudo-nickname. He also received a [posthumous name](#) or “shi hao” (諡號) of “Xiangzi” (襄子) so Count Zhi can also be referred to as “Zhi Xiangzi” (智襄子)—please note that there is only a difference of one character to differentiate Count Zhi’s posthumous name of Zhi Xiangzi from that of his most bitter rival who ended up supplanting him, Zhao Xiangzi ([趙襄子](#)) who is also known as Zhao Wuxu (趙無恤). To differentiate from the other possible counts from his clan, Count Zhi can also be specifically labeled as Count Zhi Yao (智伯瑤). I have to explain these names because otherwise, the Wikipedia and any other encyclopedic articles describing these historical events and the people involved are even more confusing. [The breakup of the state of Jin](#) was actually the catalyst for Yu Rang’s transformation into an assassin as it was a process that first started out with Yu Rang’s former masters, the Fan and Zhonghang clans, being eliminated by his current master, Count Zhi, but also planted the seeds for Count Zhi’s death and the ultimate destruction of his clan. With the loss of the Fan and Zhonghang clans, the state of Jin had only four out of the six aristocratic clans remaining and left the Zhi clan the most powerful of them all. But Count Zhi then started trying to consolidating the Zhi clan’s power and territory by taking advantage of his clan’s superiority and demanded concessions from the three remaining clans of Zhao (趙), Wei (韓), and Han (韓). So they rebelled and turned on the Zhi clan in the [Battle of Jinyang](#) (晉陽之戰), leaving the Zhi clan shattered and their former fiefdom evenly split between the three victorious clans. Because of his personal feud with Count Zhi, after Count Zhi’s defeat and death which he personally orchestrated, Zhao Xiangzi even went so far as

to lacquer Count Zhi's skull to use as a drinking cup. Because of this indignity done to his sovereign lord's corpse, Yu Rang vowed revenge against Zhao Xiangzi. Yu Rang's first assassination attempt entailed him going undercover into Zhao Xiangzi's palace and hiding in the toilet. However, Yu Rang was caught before he could kill Zhao Xiangzi but he was let go since Zhao Xiangzi admired his loyalty and bravery. The recorded exchange between them here is the source for one of Yu Rang's other well known quotes, which isn't the one Song Jing-gong is referencing. Yu Rang didn't give up after his failure though and disguised himself as a disfigured beggar by painting his skin and swallowing charcoal to make his voice hoarse until his own wife couldn't recognize him. His friend did though and tried to dissuade Yu Rang from his course but to no avail. Then, Yu Rang hid under a bridge to try to ambush Zhao Xiangzi but because Zhao Xiangzi's horse suddenly took a fright, it allowed Zhao Xiangzi to sense that there was an assassin lurking underneath the bridge and correctly guess that it was Yu Rang. When Yu Rang was captured, Zhao Xiangzi asked him why he was going to such extremes for Count Zhi since he had previously served the Fan and Zhonghang clans that Count Zhi had destroyed yet he hadn't avenged them so Zhao Xiangzi wanted to know why he was avenging Count Zhi's death. The latter half of Yu Rang's response is what Song Jing-gong is quoting here: “至於智伯，[國士](#)遇我，我故國士報之。” It roughly translates to “As for Count Zhi, I was treated as a ‘guo shi’ ([國士](#)), thus I will treat him as a ‘guo shi’ ([國士](#)).” It makes more sense when you know that the previous sentence of Yu Rang's response states that since the Fan and Zhonghang clans treated him as a common pedestrian, then he repaid them with pedestrian loyalty. I've translated “guo shi” ([國士](#)) as “gentleman of the state” even though shi/[士](#) really has multiple connotations since it can mean “scholar, gentleman, soldier, or warrior.” The exact meaning of shi/[士](#) is dependent on what context in which it is used in as well as what other characters it is combined with but if you consider it as having knightly

implications, it would be a good correlation to draw to understand what being a shi/士 entailed. “Guo Shi” (國士) as a term is derived from how Sima Qian describes [Han Xin](#) (韓信) when recording his exploits in the Biography of the Marquis of Huaiyin ([淮陰侯列傳](#)) from his Records, “guo shi wu shuang” (國士無雙), which basically means a “gentleman of the state with no equal.” A roughly similar label in English would be “national hero.” Song Jing-gong modified and paraphrased Yu Rang’s original words by replacing Count Zhi (智伯) with jun/君 which has been simplified in meaning in modern-day Chinese to just mean “lord or sovereign” but ancient Chinese actually used it as a form of intimate address or polite and archaic way to say “you.” You can see these alternate uses reflected in how 君 was adapted into Japanese as [Kanji](#) since it can be pronounced as “kimi” (きみ) when it means “you” or pronounced as “kun” (くん) and used as a suffix when addressing younger men or boys (ex: Shin-kun or Shiro-kun). Because of these considerations, I translated jun/君 as “thou” since it gives off an archaic feeling in English and the intimate feeling that usage of “[thou](#)” was meant to have before people forgot that it was actually supposed to be familiar and wasn’t actually formal language (because of the Bible) is rather fitting in this context too since Song Jing-gong is trying to increase the closeness of their relationship. In summary, Song Jing-gong is basically stating that he will reciprocate Xiaobao and Juan-Juan’s respectful treatment of him with the same level of loyalty that Yu Rang historically gave. Whew! That took a bit of explaining but I thought it was an interesting lecture... I apologize if it was a bit boring and convoluted. I tried to cut it down as much as possible...

5] The Chinese idiom used here is “ren qing leng nuan” (人情冷暖). I translated it literally since it conveys the meaning well enough but for those who wish for specific nuances, it’s basically an expression that is used to illustrate how the peaks and valleys of life exposes people to the warmth and coldness possible within the

range of human emotion since when you're riding high, everyone will show you their best sides and shower you with positive attention but when you've fallen low in life, hardly anyone will bother to show you anything but their worst sides or apathy and leave you emotionally cold.

6] The term used here is “fu lao” (父老), which literally means “father elder.” It's an idiosyncratic way of addressing an older audience in a “ladies and gentleman” general kind of way.

7] To lao/烙 something is to press down on the food so it is baked or fried on top of a flat, heated cooking surface. A flat cake or bing/餅 made in such a way is called a “[laobing](#)” (烙餅) and resembles a pan-fried pancake. Because of how it is cooked, I chose to translate it as “pan-fry.”

8] The original Chinese raw had *醬肉絲 with the asterisk standing in for a character but I'm not sure what the censored character might have been or why it would have been censored.

9] “Shi wai tao yuan” ([世外桃源](#)) translates to “world external peach source.” If you consider that in Chinese folklore, the [peaches of immortality](#) could be consumed to gain immortality much like the role [ambrosia](#) played in [Greek mythology](#) and that the realms outside of the mundane or mortal world were considered the domain of the gods and immortal sages, then the the place that is the origin of peaches outside of this world would be an euphemism for the Chinese equivalent of a garden of [Eden](#). So, I chose to translate this term as “otherworldly paradise.” This specific idiom was coined in the fable titled “[The Peach Blossom Spring](#)” or “Tao Hua Yuan Ji” (桃花源記) by [Tao Yuanming](#) (陶淵明), a poet

from [Eastern Jin dynasty](#) during the [Six Dynasties period](#). When labeling a real life place with this expression, it is usually meant to evoke how beautiful and isolated from the real world (and thus preserved in its natural beauty) it is.

[10\]](#) “Lao you suo yang” ([老有所養](#)) was a quote popularized by [Premier Wen Jiabao](#) ([温家宝/溫家寶](#)) of the [State Council of the People's Republic of China](#) China's head of government, in his address to the [2012 National People's Congress](#). The expression is itself derived from a sentence that sums up the main principles of a Chinese utopian model called “Da Tong” ([大同](#)), which is typically translated as “[Great Unity](#)” in English. This was a philosophical idea whose origins come from one of the [Confucian](#) classic texts, the [Book of Rites](#) or Liji ([禮記](#)). More specifically, it is from the chapter titled “Li Yun” ([禮運](#)). These 4 characters basically are summarize the Confucian ideal of respecting the elderly by ensuring that they are provided for in their old age.

[11\]](#) “You you suo jiao” ([幼有所教](#)) is another part of the laymen's summary of an ideal proposed within the Confucian classic, the Book of Rites, in its “Li Yun” ([禮運](#)) chapter.

[12\]](#) The verb Daniu uses is “yao he” ([吆喝](#)), which essentially means “to yell.” He is referring to how vendors would sell their wares in the marketplace by yelling out slogans and prices in order to gain a potential customer's attention.

[13\]](#) The restaurant's name is “Guan Shui Lou” ([觀水樓](#)), which I've translated literally. Again, lou/[樓](#) is a Chinese term for a multi-story building that is not tall enough to warrant being called a tower.

[14\]](#) I translated “Bai Wei Ge” (百味閣) literally.

[15\]](#) “Huo ji” (伙計) is a northern Chinese slang term used to refer to a male employee who worked in the food and hospitality industry of ancient China (i.e. in restaurants, hotels, and inns, etc.). They tended to be responsible for greeting the customers as they entered, taking their orders, serving them, and then cleaning up afterward. So the equivalent modern job titles might be greeter, waiter, bellhop, errand boy, busboy, etc. Contrast this with the management jobs that tended to deal with the financial transactions and accounting as well as the administrative details of the business. So the image of a “huo ji” (伙計) tends to stereotypically be of a man or boy wearing an apron with a towel slung over his shoulder (sometimes with a cap). In modern times, this term is now used as a synonym for “partner/ally.” It can also be used in a way that mimics calling someone “man” or “bro” in English.

[16\]](#) I previously translated “zhang gui” (掌櫃) as “Storekeeper” since it can be used as a title for the person operating a store. However, this term also tends to be used for a business owner regardless of whether they directly managed the store. In this case, because it is being used to refer to the owner of the restaurant/hotel, I have opted for “restaurant owner” as the translation. When it is being used as a title to address the restaurant owner by, I will translate it as simply “Owner.”

[17\]](#) “Yu Chu” (御廚) refers to both the Imperial kitchens and the Imperial chefs. Obviously, the Imperial kitchens and the Imperial chefs were all supposed to be the best in China since they cooked for the Emperor.

[18\]](#) The Chinese used here is “yi jie xiang” (一截香), which means a length or span of an incense stick. This would make more sense if you understood that time in ancient China could be marked in how many of one full incense sticks or “yi zhu xiang” (一炷香) that burned down, which is a system of counting time that was derived from Buddhist monks who got too absorbed in chanting their sutras to keep constant track of time. Since the ancient Chinese divided time relatively, I will translate how Baidu summarizes it: 1 year has 12 months; 1 month has 5 weeks; 1 week has 6 days; 1 day has 12 shichen (時辰) [2 hour spans]; 1 shichen (時辰) has 4 quarter-hours ([ke](#)/刻); 1 quarter-hour (ke/刻) has 3 cups of tea (三盞茶); 1 cup of tea (一盞茶) 2 incense sticks (兩柱香); 1 incense stick (一柱香) has 5 parts (fen/分); 1 part (fen/分) has 6 finger flicks (tanzhi/彈指); 1 finger flick (tanzhi/彈指) has 10 instant moments (chana/剎那/ཨྱུ་ཁྱེད་). Because incense sticks were more or less the same size and length in ancient China, burning one down was roughly estimated to take between 40~60 minutes. Thus, a span of an incense stick, which implies that it isn't the entire length, would be less than that amount of time.

[19\]](#) The restaurant owner is using “ben ren” (本人), which means “self person” as an illeism that is neutral in tone to refer to himself. It is not humble but it is not arrogant, either. I could only compromise by translating it as “[oneself](#).”

[20\]](#) Liuzi (六子) means “sixth child/son.”

Chapter 30: Winning Over People's Hearts Once Again

Erniu was very successful in his talks with Waterview House. Not only did he sell the spicy sauce but he had also made another deal at the same time with Waterview House. And that was that for some of the new dishes that required the spicy sauce that would periodically appear in the manor, Waterview House would spend a sum of money for each one that came out and they would all be insured by the brokerage people.

When the restaurant owner invited them to a meal, they had decided upon the first dish right then and there: 'carrots simmered in sauce.' Not only did getting this dish made require spending money, even the carrots and spicy sauce had to be purchased from the manor as they weren't sold elsewhere.

The price of the carrots was rather cheap, 1 catty for 5 wen [cash] while the price for the sauce was a little bit more expensive. After all, there was meat inside, ~ne. So it was 1 catty for 12 wen [cash].

After finishing the talks with Waterview House, both Erniu and Daniu went to the Hundred-Flavored Pavilion next door. This time though, they actually didn't even get to see the restaurant owner as they were directly sent out by the lobby manager. The two of them weren't worried though. This actually fit into Little Mister's calculations. Wait until Waterview House's food sold well, then the Hundred-Flavored Pavilion would come begging. At that point, the price would not be the same.

After the two of them finished selling the sauce, they found a

little eatery within Sanshui County that was being managed poorly and bought it using silver straightaway. They didn't send away the original owner either as they invited him to continue managing the store. After the store had been put to order, the several carts full of carrots that hadn't been hauled away were sent over to the store. The previous menu didn't change but eight dishes using carrots were newly added.

Finished dealing with these things, Daniu and Erniu were finally free so they moved into the room behind the store to stay for two days before going back. The several dozen catties of spicy sauce that had been shipped here this time were enough to sell to Waterview House for several days. Once they returned, there would be new jobs for them to take care of.

In Tuqiao Village, work on Zhang Manor's construction site was bustling with frenzied activity¹ as each and every person from the manor were vigorously digging after having just finished eating. This was only at Zhang Xiaobao's request as this group of people had rested for not even a quarter-hour.

Zhang Xiaobao was afraid that they'd eat till they were too full and get sick. After rolling up the shredded meat in spicy sauce with the chopped scallions within the large flat cakes, then that really was just two bites each. Scoop out the cooked bones and coat them with garlic sauce—eating that was just aromatic. Sprinkle scallions and parsley on top of the greasy soup and with a gu-lu-lu, you could drink half a bowl in just one gulp.

Watching this, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan started to crave² it, too. Finally, they really couldn't resist and the two of them

asked for a big bowl of soup. They placed the flat cake, which had been torn into bits and pieces that were smaller than their fingernails, inside to soak along with the parsley and scallions. Waiting till it had cooled down a little, only then did they drink it one sip and one person at time there.

Since there was soup to drink, Zhang Xiaobao wasn't as worried about the workers overstuffing themselves. If so, the soup could directly wash it down.

To the side, Xiaohong also ate while still being responsible for preparing the bone marrow for Little Mister, the two of them. Using chopsticks to dig out a strand of soft bone marrow before adding a bit of salt, it was suitable for Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan to eat. Bearing a bit of greasiness and a bit of bony aroma as well as being just a bit pungently meaty, eating it was satisfying beyond words. Most importantly, they needn't fear for their teeth.

“Delicious—eating together with so many people, the food smells even better.³ These bones are also good. Xiaohong, remember not to throw away the leftover bones.”

Zhang Xiaobao ate two pieces of bone marrow before he stopped as he was afraid getting nauseous if he ate too much. Then he called over Xiaohong.

“Understood, Little Mister. Keep them once this meal is done—they can be cooked again for dinner. Digging out the pond can't be completed within a day. For tomorrow's lunchtime, we'll just add some fresh bones and continue eating.” Xiaohong looked like she had experience.

After hearing this, the other people eating also nodded their heads. Not speaking of working for the manor, they were like this in their own homes. To be able to eat a meal together with Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan, they were already satisfied.

“That’s not the meaning here.” Wang Juan also stopped her movements and said: “Xiaobao was saying to keep the bones. Then, use a millstone to grind them into powder that can be used to do a lot of things like feeding the chickens, fertilizing the land, or raising earthworms, etc. My manor can afford a meal for people—dinner has to be newly made.”

Once these words were spoken, all of the expressions of the manor peasants varied. They couldn’t believe that this Little Miss and Little Mister were compassionate to this degree. The peasants were all honest people and didn’t know how to say any fine words so they could only take note of the words these two little kids had said until they could repay them by working hard in the days ahead.

Xiaohong naturally wouldn’t protest anymore. The food expenses were all paid for from Little Mister’s own storehouse. If Little Mister didn’t fear spending too much and could let the peasants eat well, she was more than willing, too.

Those children who had been catching the river snails also ate together with them. The children had small stomachs so even if they ate a lot, they still couldn’t compare to the adults. Each and every one of them ate till their little bellies were round and full. They still wished to continue eating yet were unable to so they

could only look on anxiously.

“If you can’t eat anymore, then don’t eat. You’ll overstuff yourselves.” Xiaohong handed the children oil-paper⁴ to pack the food with according to their serving sizes plus a bit more with the thinking that the children wouldn’t be able to eat more after returning and were bringing it back for their family members.

One of the little kids called Erzi helplessly nodded: “Don’t we all want to eat a bit more? It’d be best to eat our fill for lunch tomorrow. Tonight, I won’t eat and bring it back for my younger sister to eat.”

“It’ll get better. Life will get better from now on.” Zhang Xiaobao said lightly as he smacked his lips twice. Only Wang Juan knew how much resolve he needed to have when he said these words.

The peasants continued working while Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan returned home to start training. A child’s bones were soft as they hadn’t completely finished growing so any running or jumping movements that were too intense couldn’t be done. They could only adjust to it a bit at a time. The only benefit was that a child’s body recovered quickly. That day, they’d be so tired that they couldn’t speak; the next day, they would be just as energetically hyperactive⁵ as before.

The item that Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were drilling today was rolls. They had Xiaohong take out a blanket to spread out on the floor. The two of them would then vigorously roll back and forth on it. This could actually exercise a lot of areas as it was still

too wet outside and there was no way to go walking in the sand.

“Xiaobao, let’s rest for a while and talk— all dizzy from rolling.” Wang Juan flipped over and leaned against Zhang Xiaobao’s body as she swung to a stop.

“What’d you say?” Zhang Xiaobao was also sweaty all over.

“I saw that the exterior road for the manor isn’t easy to walk. Should a bit of money be used to repair the roads with? Change should always start from the up close. Allowing the people of the manor sense this will encourage their cohesiveness.” Wang Juan reached out to accept the water that Xiaohong handed over, sipping it once before she spoke.

“No money. This little bit of money that I’ve made, I’m keeping it so I can buy some rice and flour, ~ne. There’s still another month or so before the wheat will need to be harvested. I need to buy more. Whether or not the family’s land and that grant of 100 heads can be saved will rely on this single chance.”

Zhang Xiaobao didn’t even think before rejecting it. The roads could be repaired at any time but it wouldn’t do to not buy food grains. He had a grand plan—a plan to trade for their family’s status. When collecting the food grains, the cooperation between the two families of Zhang and Wang would still be needed.

“Then, never mind. Have Yingtao collect some duck eggs and goose eggs tomorrow. Since we want to raise them, then we’ll have to get some here.” Wang Juan bypassed this matter and began

planning.

Zhang Xiaobao also nodded: “Right, most certainly have to raise them—especially ducks. By the beginning of spring next year, it’d be best if we could have several thousand ducks. I want to see who’d dare take back our family’s land then. Let’s go shower and sleep.”

This was considered a temporary conclusion to the conversation. Over there, Xiaohong had already prepared the hot water in advance and placed the two children inside to wash off the sweat on their bodies. Carrying them over to the couch and using the blanket to cover their navels, she could then sit by the doorway to read books and learn her characters.

Once it was evening, Song Jing-gong finally returned with quite a few soybeans. Upon entering the manor’s domain, he saw that there were people hauling carrots outside in one carriage after the other. Not knowing where they were being transported to and curious about it, he stopped a person to ask: “Where’s it being taken?”

“Xinping City, they’re being stored over there. After a few days, there’s going to be people over there coming over here to buy them. If they’re sold directly, it won’t hold things up.” One of the coachmen recognized Song Jing-gong as the Juren that was willing to work for the manor after being swindled by Little Mister.

“Oh, how much money is it going to be sold for?” Song Jing-gong didn’t find this strange but wanted to know the price.

“1 catty for 5 wen [cash]—Erniu has already gone to Sanshui County to sell them. It looks like they were sold. Otherwise, Erniu would be frantic to rush back here.”

“How much? 5 wen [cash] 1 catty? That’s to say, I originally sold them too cheaply?” Song Jing-gong was a bit dumbfounded. He’d initially assumed that only through swindling could they be sold so expensively. Who’d have thought that after cycling through Little Mister’s hands that the price would actually increase so much and be sold for five times the price?

It really was too fantastical. How could it be sold just like that, ne? He hadn’t even thought it through, ne, before that coachman resumed talking.

“Little Mister has said that these aren’t easy to preserve so keep the ones that are slightly better, get a root cellar to store them in, and wait until winter to sell them for 10 wen [cash] per catty. Winter has few vegetables so everybody would want to eat something fresh.”

Song Jing-gong didn’t know how he walked back to the courtyard house. His heart had already been filled by pile after pile of copper coins; if it couldn’t hold anymore, then switch them out for silk and shining white silver—in any case, the money was plentiful.

Before he could go inside, he caught sight of Little Mister, the two of them, eating and drinking with a group of peasants over

there. Because the peasants were doing a lot of work, Zhang Xiaobao was afraid that they'd suddenly get exhausted and feel uncomfortable all over tomorrow, especially from standing on top of the muddy ground as some people had their feet submerged by the pooling water.

They could easily get sick after going home so he had Xiaohong specially prepare some wine. When everyone was eating, one person could drink two bowls. Warmed wine with ginger strips added was good as it got rid of the chills and could even help increase blood circulation.

This treatment was seriously too good as there was meat and wine, causing the peasants to eat till their hearts were warm. If it weren't for Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan not permitting them to continue their labors at night, they even thought of firing up the torches to continue digging. How much money was this one meal? Each and every one of them didn't want any wages.

"Little Mister, those carrots that you [honorific] spoke of—how were they sold? Initially, I felt that 1 wen [cash] for 1 catty was swindling people. Could it be that you [honorific] found a gullible person?" Song Jing-gong didn't care whether other people were drinking wine or not as he ran over to get clarification.

"Why is swindling needed, ~ne? With carrots, this stuff is originally pretty good. When selling them to other people, just teach how to make them. Once everybody knows how to eat them, they will naturally become expensive. Moreover, eating carrots is beneficial to the body and it tastes good."

Zhang Xiaobao wanted to change that kind of thinking of Song Jing-gong's where he always first thought of swindling whenever he ran across something. Seeing that Song Jing-gong had returned dusty and worn from travel and definitely had not eaten dinner, he spoke in invitation.

“Zijin must have been exhausted over these two days, right? Quickly, eat while it's still hot. With so many people, eating becomes lively. Xiaohong, get some meat for Zijin over here. Eat it with garlic sauce—it's perfect as a wine appetizer.”

As he spoke, he and Wang Juan moved to the side to make room for Song Jing-gong to sit in. As for whether Song Jing-gong was willing or not, there was no need for consideration. Xiaobao himself was eating together with the peasants so what else could he do?

Notes:

[1\]](#) The Chinese idiom used here is “re huo chao tian” (熱火朝天) which literally means “hot fire reaching sky.” This makes sense if you realize the hot fire is a metaphor for hubbub or commotion since liveliness is literally “hot noise” or “re nao” (熱鬧) in Chinese. So for the heat of the chaos to reach the skies is to be really lively, indeed.

[2\]](#) The specific character used here of chan/饞 is actually one that translates to “ravenous or gluttonous” and is used to describe a specific greed for food. You can tell this because it has the [radical](#) for food or shi/食 in the character itself. So it is a way of describing

when someone has a food craving in Chinese.

3] Technically, Xiaobao uses the character meaning “fragrant” or xiang/香 here. This is another Chinese habit where declaring a food that is tasty or delicious to be fragrant is synonymous with complimenting its flavor and the experience of eating it. This is likely because xiang/香 also has a connotation of comfort or enjoyment (it makes sense if you realize fragrances or perfumes are a sign of luxury and wealth so it calls up an image of lounging at ease).

4] I wasn’t able to find an exactly equivalent paper made in the West but “you zhi” (油紙) is exactly what it says it is. It’s paper that’s been coated by or dipped in oil—tung oil (桐油) to be exact, which is oil that has been extracted from the tung tree (桐油樹), Latin name of which is [Vernicia fordii](#). This paper is water resistant so it is perfect for packaging food in as well as to use in making umbrellas with. Chinese umbrellas, which are made from this type of paper, are called [oil-paper umbrellas](#) (油紙傘) for this reason. For the sake of reference, the types of paper made in the West that oil-paper probably resembles the most in form or function was either [greaseproof paper](#) or [wax paper](#) (also known as paraffin paper).

5] The idiom used here is “huo beng luan tiao” (活蹦亂跳), which when broken down, means “living bounce, randomly jump.” It calls up the image of a hyperactive bunny so a roughly equivalent English expression might be “alive and kicking.” However, I opted not to use that phrase as the translation since “alive and kicking” usually tends to be associated with situations where a death is rumored or the person is in their dotage but still going strong (or claims to be anyway), which is the opposite of the case here.

Chapter 31: With Autumn's Arrival, The Tree Leaves Have Already Turned Red

The summer days gradually left as the mornings and the nights cooled with autumn's coming.

The digging of the pond on the manor had been completed and the river water had been channeled into it. Yingtao gathered quite a few duck eggs and goose eggs and they had all been placed on top of the kang [bed-stove] as they incubated, ~ne. A clutch of chicks were chasing each other to and fro in sport within the courtyard. After raising them for these past few days, there was now no need to feed them rice porridge as they themselves could eat something more solid.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both looked enviously at the chicks. The two of them still couldn't eat stuff that was too hard. If they ate a bit of flat cake, they still had to nurse it in their mouth before they could gulp it down. Meat could only be simmered until it was in pieces although they could eat some fish meat.

"Chicks grow faster than people do. Several days after hatching, they can eat sand. Have to step up the time table for grinding the stuff that Shiliu is overseeing—I've thought of a good thing."

Zhang Xiaobao plucked a bug from the flowers by the side of the courtyard and placed it on the ground. A chick immediately came over to eat it. The bug was a bit bigger as it was a kind of caterpillar that was nearly in its pupal stage. It had quite a few eye-like objects on top and after eating for an entire summer, it had already been fattened up.

The chick pecked at it and vigorously shook its head. To the side, there were chicks that came over to fight over it as well. The chicks wiped out a single bug within an instant or two.

“What idea?” Wang Juan didn’t fear bugs like other girls so she simply didn’t care. She was rather interested in Zhang Xiaobao’s idea though.

“Actually, it’s nothing. I just wanted to make something for my Grandpa and Grandma as well as your Grandpa and Grandma to eat. Yesterday night, the people from your family all came over to my home and they even kissed me till my face was covered in saliva. I want to get some bone marrow and also get some bones ground into powder to use to stir-fry up some stir-fried noodles¹ and add some walnuts² or whatever.”

Zhang Xiaobao had met Wang Juan’s Grandpa and Grandma yesterday. Their two bodies weren’t that healthy and when they had come over, they kept on rubbing their legs. It looked like they had a calcium deficiency.

“What can it do? Can it be absorbed?” Wang Juan was a bit grateful to Zhang Xiaobao. After all, to have the senior generation in this lifetime was good. For the elders of both families to still be present, that was the greatest happiness.

“It can. In order to supplement for calcium, it’s actually nothing more than just an item containing calcium along with vitamins A and D. The pure form can’t be refined but there are still edible

foods containing them such as the oil extracted from fish liver or that layer that appears on top of cow or goat milk after it's been cooked. It'll be fine to add it inside.

All right, let's do this. Wait until our two families can all eat well, then we'll bring it out to sell. There are so many things inside, who would know what the formula is? It can even treat night blindness,³ ~ne. Let's first eat it ourselves and then wait till I can spare extra before we sell it outwardly en masse."

As Zhang Xiaobao schemed, he squatted down to touch the chicks. The chicks weren't afraid, either, as they even tilted their heads and used eyes filled with curiosity to gaze at Zhang Xiaobao.

"Then, let's do it. We can drink it, too. The recipe will need to be adjusted. If the calcium supplements are too high, problems will come up. Temporarily remove the walnuts from what is being given to the adults. If it's too fatty, it could easily cause cardiovascular disease. Have them eat more vegetables as the norm. I've heard that stuff ginkgo⁴ is good. The good stuff should first be used by our own people."

Wang Juan ended up agreeing. Recently, she and Zhang Xiaobao had increased some of the amount when training as they continued their nutritional supplements, especially with things high in calories.

Xiaohong listened to the side. She didn't comprehend some of the matters that Little Mister and Little Miss would speak of every day. She only knew that as long as the both of them were seriously

talking there and helping each other to correct it, then what was settled upon in the end was definitely something impressive.

The chicks had eaten their fill and with the blink of an eye, had run off to some unknown place. At this time, Erniu rushed over and upon entering the courtyard house, he excitedly said: “Little Mister, good news! Hundred Flavored Pavilion’s owner went to find me and my [Older] Bro yesterday to say that they wanted to buy that spicy sauce. I followed your [honorific] instructions and sold it for an extra 2 wen [cash] to him—those carrots, too. When he returned, he kicked out the manager from that day, claiming that they’d caused him to lose quite a lot of money.

Little Mister, Hundred Flavored Pavilion’s owner wants to buy 500 dan [stone] from us here at the price of 7 wen [cash] per catty. Should it be sold? Here now, it’s quite a bit of a change, ~ah. Compared to when it had first been exchanged for, it was more expensive by quite a lot.”

“500 dan [stone]? His appetite’s rather large and he’s also shrewd as a person. When you get back, tell him that there are already not that many carrots. At most, you can only sell him 20 dan [stone] or around 2,000 catties of it, which should be enough for him to sell till winter. After a few days, the price will increase.”

This time, Zhang Xiaobao didn’t even need to speak as Wang Juan had already made the call. She could still understand such a simple matter. Wasn’t that owner thinking to wait till the price had increased later on?

“Unh, then just say that. If they want it, ship it over from those

barbarians. With the delay in the time to get from there and then return, it'll be too late. Erniu, first give this business to Daniu to handle. The same with selling the sauce. Ready yourself over these next two days. After the fall harvest, go acquire a lot of food grains for me. Whatever food grains there are, I'll want them. I'll give you money here—the more, the better.”

After several days, they would need to harvest the food grains. There really were no people by Zhang Xiaobao's side. Moreover, they couldn't purchase them all in one place as that could easily draw the notice of the local authorities. He had a share here; his mother had a share there; Wang Juan's family also had a share; and Song Jing-gong—he could be sent to a place a bit further away to gather them.

“Meself⁵ knows. Little Mister, you [honorific] rest assured. Whatever you [honorific] want meself to do, meself will do whatever.” Erniu changed from that formerly clever appearance of his to take on a simple and honest demeanor as he spoke there, causing Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan to laugh. If Erniu was simple and honest, then how many clever people were there?

After another two days, Shiliu had all the things that she'd picked up and brought back as well as bought at a low price or traded for ground up into powder. It couldn't be fed at this time as that was a bit wasteful—it still needed to wait till all of the food grains had been harvested and it could be mixed with the chaff⁶ and wheat bran.⁷

Yingtao herself made an area with kang [bed-stove] that was connected together. Placed on top of the entire surface of the kang

[bed-stove] were chicken eggs, duck eggs, and goose eggs. The clutch of chicks that had already been hatched had been taken away by Songri Nigan. They'd even sold him some specially made feed to use on the road to feed the chickens with.

On the other side where they were raising the earthworms, Shiliu had also arranged for people to acquire rotten firewood and excrement or whatever else from each family to all be steeped in there. Underneath were the earthworms that the children had dug up. Next year, there would be a lot more.

Only Xiaohong had nothing to do. She obeyed Zhang Xiaobao's instructions and caught some cold-resistant fish, throwing them into the pond, and then ignoring them. The ducks and geese were still not in place so while she envied the others, she also knew that she still had to wait.

For Song Jing-gong, his job was easy. After all, what he had to manage in the past had been a lot, too. To buy some soybeans and find reliable people from the manor who could extract the soybean oil was very simple. The oil yield was a bit lower and not the 15% that Zhang Xiaobao had imagined it to be, barely reaching 10% instead though that was an issue of the production technology.

The soybean press cakes that were left behind after the oil extraction weren't wasted, either, as they were directly sent over to Erniu's family for them to keep for when making the spicy sauce. Everything all had to wait until next year to have an effect. Before their eyes, what could turn a profit were solely the spicy sauce and carrots. Comparatively, the two stores in Sanshui County didn't have that much of an income.

“Fall has arrived.” When the first tree leaf fell down, Zhang Xiaobao was standing outside by the stream and looking at the yellow and withered scene before his eyes as he feelingly said a sentence.

“Unh, they’ll be reaping tomorrow. It’s good that it didn’t rain. When the golden yellow fills the eyes,⁸ you’ll discover that not only have the skies and flowing clouds grown distant but so have some of the memories that you feared recalling yet were unwilling to forget.”

Wang Juan’s eyes were fixed on the flowing water as she looked at the clouds curl and unfold in that sky, a bit homesick. As she thought of that past family, she felt Zhang Xiaobao’s presence at this time and knew then that she had someone accompanying her so she wasn’t so lonely and was grateful or rather, as each supported the other.

“It should snow for winter. Then, we can build a snowman. Build a big, big one. Even if it’ll melt in spring, we can still make it every year.” Zhang Xiaobao didn’t know how to comfort Wang Juan. He didn’t have any regrets since in that world, he wouldn’t have been able to be alive right now.

“Unh, let go back—build the swings and train our adaptability to heights a bit. Why couldn’t you have studied science and technology,⁹ ~ne? Are there these kinds of experts in the prisons? I want electric lights, ~ne. It’s too dark at night.”

Wang Juan pulled on her clothing before turning around to go back. There were some things that should be adapted to that must be adapted to.

“No fear. There’s money this year so we’ll prepare more candles. We’ll light them then.” Zhang Xiaobao knew that Wang Juan wasn’t afraid of the dark but was afraid of dreaming.

“Why don’t you know how to comfort me a bit more? I’m a little child right now.” Wang Juan deliberately used words that would lighten up the atmosphere.

Zhang Xiaobao smiled: “I’ve been doing that. Just like that song I overheard by the window of an elementary school—I came back last year, you wore new cotton robes; I came to see you today, you grew fat and tall; do you all remember the lotus flowers in the pond turning into lotus pods?¹⁰ No worries about having no color with few flowers, I will dye the tree leaves red.”

“What song is that? It’s so nice—how come I don’t remember it?” Wang Juan asked with surprise.

“The Words of the West Wind.¹¹ It’s part of the elementary school appreciation course. You might not have appreciated it there as there were always music teachers who were cutting corners and skipping material.¹² When I heard it back then, I thought that it was nice. Later on when I grew up, I knew that embedded within it was philosophy and hope.”

Zhang Xiaobao kicked a pebble in the air with one leg, scaring the chicks that had grown up quite a bit into squawking fright as they ran away.

“What kind of skill is there in bullying chicks?” Wang Juan’s mood had improved quite a bit.

“I would rather bully the old yellow dog but I’m afraid of him biting me.” Zhang Xiaobao said, playing along.

Before, Xiaohong had been standing by next to Little Mister, the two of them. When she had been listening to them both speak, she somehow felt like Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan were so, so distant from herself. It was only until this moment that she discovered that the two of them had returned once again. That kind of sensation had really been too horrible to feel.

The swings had already been prepared—it was just that they had not been hung up yet. When Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan returned to the courtyard house, they immediately arranged for people to set up the swings. At this time, the sky was clear and the clouds were light so going on the swings would feel the best.

For the sake of not letting themselves accidentally fall off, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan even specially designed something in the middle that could act as a brake for the front, back, right, and left—just like that octopus that could move up and down that they’d played with in the past.¹³

To start required only a little force and the two of them could

swing up really high by themselves, bursting out with child-like laughter in the air and frightening Xiaohong who could only worry at the sidelines.

Having waited with difficulty for the swing to finally stop, Xiaohong hurried to let Little Mister, the both of them, think of other matters and asked: “Little Mister, what will be eaten at night?”

“Eating what? Among those chicks that Yingtao hatched, they can’t possibly all be hens. She’s raising the roosters in another place. Here are two. You go request one more. Tonight, we’ll be eating spring chickens.”¹⁴ Zhang Xiaobao jumped off the swing, pulling Wang Juan to go inside in preparation for reading books as he casually gave the instructions.

Notes:

^{1]} “You cha mian” ([油茶麵](#)), meaning “oil tea noodles,” is also known as “you chao mian” ([油炒麵](#)) or “oil fried noodles” and would be more familiar to American readers as [chow mein](#), which is the [American Chinese or Westernized version](#) of the dish. Since chow mein itself is a name that’s derived from an erroneous transcription and is also a very specific variation that is rather different from the original Chinese dish, I chose to translate the name literally in this case. This stir-fried noodle dish is actually wheat flour noodles mixed with sauce made out oil, sugar, preserved fruits, nuts such as peanuts or walnuts, and sesame. You can think of this dish as a vegetarian version of [zhajiangmian](#) ([炸醬麵](#)) or “fried sauce noodles,” which is the origin of the Korean dish of [jajangmyeon](#) ([자장면/炸醬麵](#)).

2] “He tao ren” (核桃仁) are walnuts. The Chinese name actually means “walnut innards” reflecting how walnuts are actually the stuff that you get when you crack open the walnut shell. Why I am footnoting this is because there is only a difference of 1 character from “tao ren” (桃仁), the Chinese name for “peach kernels,” which are used in traditional Chinese medicine, and ke/核 by itself can be a character that acts as [a counter or measure word](#) and can also mean “kernel.” So there is a possibility that the author doesn’t mean walnuts if there was a typo or I am misinterpreting the text here.

3] The original Chinese had “ye mang zheng” (夜盲證) or “night blind proof” but that is probably a typo since the correct word in Chinese for [night blindness or nyctalopia](#) is a homophone, “ye mang zheng” (夜盲症). There are different types of night blindness, which depend on how it is caused. It can be congenital but it can also be attributed to malnutrition or injury. Obviously, Xiaobao and Juan-Juan are referring to the type that is caused by malnutrition like a [vitamin A deficiency](#). This condition is what it says it is—sufferers can see fine during the day but have little to no night vision, being effectively blinded at night.

4] “Yin Xing” (銀杏) means “silver apricot” and is the Chinese name for the plant that is known as [ginkgo biloba](#) in English, which is usually known as ginkgo for short (it can also be spelled gingko). The English name was itself derived from an erroneous transcription of one of the possible Japanese pronunciations of the Kanji, “gin kyo” (though 銀杏 is actually read as “gin nan” in Japanese). The tree itself is also known as the maidenhair tree and is native to China. Ginkgo can be eaten for nutritional purposes but it is most well known for the medicinal properties ascribed to it by [traditional Chinese medicine](#).

5] An/俺 is an informal personal pronoun used for “I” that originated in northern China and gradually spread outward though its usage is still primarily concentrated in the region of northern China (think of the [American English](#) usage of “y’all” in the southern parts of the U.S. versus the rest of the country). This is one of the rare times in Chinese when using a pronoun that means “I” or “me” doesn’t give the listener an arrogant or proud impression of the speaker. Mostly because it was used by uneducated peasants and commoners, this pronoun gives off a country yokel or backwoods hick sort of feeling in Chinese. By the way, this pronoun was unisex and could be used by both men and women. However, when this character was adapted into the Japanese language, the connotations changed as it became “ore” (おれ/俺), a male [personal pronoun](#) in Japanese that can be construed as very rude given the context or at least very masculine and proud (leading to the impression of arrogance). Curiously, when おれ/俺 was first imported into Japanese, it was also an unisex pronoun before it became a male-only pronoun. This progression from unisex to male-only usage is also reflected in its usage in the modern Chinese vernacular as nowadays mostly rural Chinese men would refer to themselves by this pronoun. To try to capture the image of a rural peasant associated with this pronoun in ancient Chinese, I’ve translated an/俺 as “meself.”

6] The Chinese term of “cu kang” (粗糠) translates to “rough hull,” which can be generalized as [chaff](#) in English. So this is referring to the detritus that is produced when grains are [threshed](#) to remove the husks. Chaff can be re-processed as animal feed or fodder.

7] “Mai fuzi” (麥麩子) is wheat [bran](#). In general, bran is the byproduct of milling and it is formed from the outer layer of the

grain itself. Bran is generally edible for both humans and animals, explaining why they can be re-added into foods for the sake of supplementing for dietary fiber.

[8\]](#) The Chinese used here is “jin huang man mu” (金黃滿目) which I’ve translated literally. It sounds like a quote of a poem but I’ve been looking and so far, I can’t verify which poem and poet it is from. From what I can tell, it is derived from an ode to the [rappi](#) flower whose author is anonymous.

[9\]](#) “Li gong ke” (理工科) is study of “li gong” (理工), a portmanteau formed from the Chinese translation for the acronym of [STEM](#). In Chinese, STEM was translated as “ke xue” (科學) for Science, “gong cheng” (工程) for Technology, “ji shu” (技術) for Engineering, and “shu xue” (數學) for Mathematics. So to abbreviate just like STEM does, li/理 became shorthand for science, gong/工 for technology, ji/技 for engineering, and shu/數 for math. Thus, “li gong” (理工) is basically science and technology.

[10\]](#) “Lian peng” (蓮蓬) refers to the seed pods or cases that lotus flowers transform into after the petals fall off. You can visit Baidu [here](#) for pictures (don’t click if you have [trypophobia](#) though!).

[11\]](#) I translated the name of this children’s song, “Xi Feng De Hua” (西風的話) literally here. If you wish to hear this song, you can watch the [Youtube video here](#).

[12\]](#) “Tou gong jian liao” (偷工減料) is usually a Chinese idiom that comes up a lot in terms of construction because it literally means to “steal work, lessen material.” So this is basically used for cases where corners are cut and the work is inferior. Sometimes, this

expression has connotations of embezzlement since one of the main reasons for labor and material costs being skimmed on and leading to shoddy constructions is when the construction company is skimming off the top.

[13\]](#) I'm assuming that this is a modern toy that Chinese children played with in previous generations but the description is too generic for me to pinpoint exactly what it would be.

[14\]](#) Technically, Xiaobao says “tongzi ji” ([童子雞](#)), which means “(male) virgin chicken.” However, I thought it might be a bit confusing as a name for readers if literally translated so I opted to use the English name for an equivalent dish and that was “spring chicken,” which is also known as [poussin](#) or coquelet in French. “Tongzi ji” ([童子雞](#)) were called virgin because they were all typically too young to have been bred to hens yet. You will see tongzi/[童子](#) as the Chinese word meaning “prepubescent/virgin boy” since Chinese superstition as well as [traditional Chinese medicine](#) ascribes medicinal and supernatural qualities to the urine of a virgin boy or “[tongzi niao](#)” ([童子尿](#)). Note that a boy who has gone through or is going through puberty and is capable of sperm production would not be considered a “tongzi” ([童子](#)) and would just be considered a typical virgin man or “chu nan” ([處男](#)) instead. Tongzi/[童子](#) can also simply be used in Chinese for its literal meaning of “young boy” without any reference to its connotation of virgin.

Chapter 32: The Harvested Food Grains Gathered Into Piles

The next day, the autumn air was clear and crisp as the people of the two manors of Zhang and Wang began to reap the cereal grains in the fields.

The adults were in front tying up the grain crops in bundle after bundle to be transported to the grain drying field.¹ The little kids carried a basket in back to carefully pick up the rice paddies² or wheat ears³ that had been overlooked.

The members of Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan's two families also went over to put on appearances, which could be considered to be setting an example. Although there was no need for them since others already knew how to do it.

Everything seemed to not be any different from before. The only difference was that this year's harvesting methods had changed. In the past, every family harvested it themselves and after it had been collected, they went to the manor to pay rent.⁴ Meanwhile, the two manors were responsible for providing the food this year. Everyone began together from one plot, gathering the food grains—whichever house they had been harvested from, they would be piled up in whichever house's place and it would be recorded.

The benefit of doing it like this was that when working, everyone had a kind of reference and there would be nobody slacking off or taking shortcuts. How much someone worked, they could all tell, ~ne. If they really wanted to be lazy, then they would be too

embarrassed to open their mouths when it came time to eat.

At this time, Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao were also following along and watching by the sidelines as swath after swath of rice paddies and wheat was harvested and hauled away. Everyone was full of hope. Due to that grant of 100 heads, Zhang Manor could subtract 100 heads worth of money and grain from what they had to pay.

It was said to be 100 households but it was really 100 people. Otherwise, everyone could be gathered into one household to get 10,000 people. Wang Juan's family didn't have this treatment so whatever they needed to pay, they still had to pay.

"After we've gathered the grain crops, have your family give my family a bit. My family has to hand over a lot, ~ne." Wang Juan felt that it wasn't fair once she thought of this point. Zhang Manor had a better time than Wang Manor because they didn't need to pay for those 100 heads. She'd heard that the Zhang family would collect a bit less and retain a bit more each year.

"What for? The two manors don't even do their accounts together. I myself have an account of my own, ~ne. If you want to give something, take it from both of our things—you can't use my family's." Zhang Xiaobao immediately expressed opposition. This type of matter couldn't be mixed up just like his money hadn't been touched by his family and it all belonged to him to manage.

"Then, I'll get 200 bolts of silk from our storehouse to send to my house." Wang Juan said as if in a fit of pique.

“Take it. How much can 200 bolts be worth? 1 bolt is 200 wen [cash]; 200 bolts are 40,000 wen [cash] or 40 silver taels—I’ll give it.” Zhang Xiaobao appeared like he could care less.

“Stingy. What are we eating today—still eating spring chicken?” Wang Juan said two words but wasn’t willing to get entangled on this type of matter.

“No, there’s something even better today. Look over in that land there. Except for food grains, what else is there?”

“There are people.” Wang Juan replied.

“Other than people, ~ne. Look, they’re even flying there, ~ne, one chasing and one jumping. Grasshoppers—we’ll eat these today. In a bit, let’s have them, the little kids, help to catch them. I’ll use soybean oil to trade for them. We can go back and use the oil to fry them with. It’ll be fragrant and crispy.”

Zhang Xiaobao pointed at the grasshoppers that were wildly flying about to and fro in that field there, swallowing his drool as he spoke.

“All right. Let’s wait till the harvest is done and have them go catch them. Release the chicks, too. Yingtao has hatched so many chicks—they can grow out a lot of meat now.”

Wang Juan wasn’t averse to this kind of thing. When she’d been

training in the past, she had eaten a lot of them before. Don't even mention cooked ones. She had even stuffed raw ones in her mouth that gushed forth a wave of green water with one bite. It had been fine once she got past that disgusting stage.

When it was time to eat at noon, there were even more people and it was indeed the men and women, the elderly and young who had all joined in together. Lunch was simpler, being fried shredded cakes⁵ with meat and stir-fried radish strips as well as more than enough to drink of the cucumber and chicken egg soup.

So it was like this that they busied themselves for three consecutive days before they had finished harvesting the two manors' grain crops. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan had also specially eaten deep-fried grasshoppers for three days. A swath of chicks had been released and with the crops not even done being threshed,⁶ ~ne, there were practically no grasshoppers left remaining in the fields.

“Little Mister, it's all thanks to the manor's chicks. Otherwise, much of this year's harvest will have been eaten by these grasshoppers. Don't look at how small they are—they're too many. While we threshed the grains, we'd also have to feed the grasshoppers.”

Xiaohong had also eaten two meals and thought that the taste was really not that bad. She was currently holding one to stuff into her mouth as she reminisced.

The speaker had no intent but the listener applied meaning.⁷

On the same wavelength,⁸ Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan exchanged looks and laughed at the same time before Wang Juan spoke up.

“Xiaohong, go call for Steward Zhang to come here.”

Xiaohong didn't know what these two little ancestors wanted to do so after running toward the back to call over Steward Zhang, she herself started eating once again.

“Little Mister, Little Miss, the two of you [honorific] asked for me?” The steward was also unsure, ~ne.

“Unh, after crossing the bridge over there is Ge Manor, right? Have their grain crops been completely harvested?” Wang Juan pointed in that direction.

“Yes, they aren't like our family with Little Mister and Little Miss in arranging for the people to harvest it collectively. They do their harvesting separately so they're slower than us by more than a day.” Steward Zhang replied.

“Then, I'm giving you a job. You'll herd our manor's chicks over there to help. Everybody has it hard. Let the chick eat—help them eat some grasshoppers. Let's consider it doing a good deed. We don't want any other reward—it's free help. Go.”

Zhang Xiaobao continued speaking and even took on an

appearance of sympathizing for man's fate. People who didn't know it would really think that he was that kind and compassionate, ~ne.

Of course, Steward Zhang didn't think this. What kind of people were Little Mister and Little Miss, ~ah? They wouldn't do anything without any benefit so upon hearing these words, he understood. The manor's chicks had clearly grown over these two days and it had been from feeding upon those grasshoppers.

Right then, he didn't hesitate and called up several people. First placing two old hens in front to lead them, the clutch of chicks rushed over there with a "hua-la." As expected, upon reaching the destination, people even thanked him, watching the chicks eat the grasshoppers inside their family's fields as they kept on speaking of the benevolence of the two manors of Zhang and Wang.

They weren't so afraid of the chick eating the grains. With grasshoppers, ~ne, who would eat the food grains, ~ah? If they used people to catch them, it took too much effort. The chicks gave chase like they didn't know what fatigue was as their two little legs rapidly pumped, eating while they pooped to fertilize the ground as well.

The ones who gained the most benefits were these peasants. If the grasshoppers ate the grain crops, their master-family didn't care since however much they had to pay, they still had to pay. So each and every one of them took advantage of their resting breaks to come over and give thanks, allowing Steward Zhang to gain quite a measure of enjoyment.

Once the Ge Manor's grasshoppers had been pretty much consumed, they herded the chick to other manors. Even if they had finished harvesting, there were grasshoppers while threshing the grains and the fields had them, too. So the chicks ate like this for the entirety of half a month. Each and every one of them ate till they were fat, ~ah. Their heads had nearly receded into their necks and when they walked there, they looked like little balls.

While the chicks were gorging themselves, the two families of Zhang and Wang also made their move as they began collecting food grains all over the place. It was currently the fall harvest and this year's yield had been quite good so the price of the food grains tended to be low. Four groups of people separately left the two manors for places that were distant and nearby, using money to purchase it with, using silk to buy it with, and using other items to barter for it as the price could be slightly higher.

Due to the trust gained from the things that Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan had produced these few times, the two manors had put much at stake. In the end, even if they couldn't make too much money, they couldn't take a loss as this type of trust had also caused Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan to be touched.

"Speak. The food grains have all been more or less collected. There are warehouses everywhere on the manor. What are you prepared to do using these food grains?" Wang Juan had been thinking of this matter for quite a long time already.

"All right, I'll speak. A portion of it, I'm prepared to give away for free; a portion to be moved elsewhere and sold for a high price. I estimate that in the end, there'll even be a slight surplus

remaining.” Zhang Xiaobao finally talked.

“Selling it where, sending it where?”

“East of the Taihang Mountains⁹ in the Henan¹⁰ area. Also, the chickens—when it’s time, they can be sent over to be raised and the laid chicken eggs can be sold for money then and there. We can use the money from selling the chicken eggs to purchase large quantities of dried seafood in the coastal areas of Shandong.¹¹ Once the seafood is transported back here, it’ll be another sum of money.” Zhang Xiaobao let it out bit by bit.

“If you give it away, they’ll want it? If you sell it at a high price, they’ll buy it? The chickens will be grown by next year, what will they eat when they get there?” Wang Juan also followed along with Zhang Xiaobao as she asked one question after another.

“According to the historical records, Tang,¹² Year 3 of Kaiyuan, there was drought and plagues of locusts.¹³ The harvest over there this year should be relatively flat compared to previous ones so there probably is already a drought and an increase in grasshoppers. Next year, it’ll be evident then.

I’m prepared to use the donated food grains to exchange for an official commendation. Driving the chickens over there to eat locusts—this should be considered to be a service of merit, right? Selling the food grains will have to be done secretly though. Can’t afford it if it’s just giving it away for free, ~ah.”

Zhang Xiaobao finally spoke of his own plans as Wang Juan nodded her head.

“A fine calculation. No wonder you were thinking up ideas to make money like crazy just for the sake of getting food grains. In the end, it was to let your family preserve that grant of 100 heads. Impressive. But, Comrade Zhang Xiaobao, my Wang Family busily worked, too. What reward is there, ~ne?”

“This, this... You listen to me speak. This requires a process. By that time, your family’s reward won’t be overlooked. Let me and you go over together. I’ll teach you what to say and do. Of course, this isn’t swindling. It’s only right to be rewarded for doing good deeds.

How does that phrase go? It’s if good deeds are done without asking for a reward, then that way, people who do good will grow fewer. If there really was a person who wanted a reward, then others would criticize him. Therefore, we have to leave some leeway for others.”

The words that Zhang Xiaobao spoke were at length and full of plausibility¹⁴ but Wang Juan curled her lips: “Isn’t it just that story of Confucius?¹⁵ Don’t even know if there’s really such an event. It’s just to find an excuse for you to fish for profits. I’ll trust you this once.”

“Unh, you absolutely mustn’t tell anyone else, especially my Dad. If he knew I was selling food at a high price, he might even have me donate those food grains as well. I sure don’t want to suffer a

loss.” Zhang Xiaobao looked in all four directions like a thief, even though he and Wang Juan were using lip speech.

“Look at how scared you are. Your heart is uneasy from your thievery.¹⁶ You know that doing this isn’t right, either? But I still support you. Why should our family’s things be given to people? It was all gained through our labors.” Wang Juan smiled as she leaned against Zhang Xiaobao. Zhang Xiaobao’s actions just now really were too interesting.

After both of them discussed it over, this matter was considered to have been decided. Then, they called over Song Jing-gong and started making arrangements for the other matter of selling the soybean oil.

“Little Mister, how should the soybean oil be sold? I’m afraid of other people not buying it.” Upon hearing this, Song Jing-gong was a bit uncertain, especially since he wasn’t allowed to swindle.

“If it’s directly, of course there wouldn’t be people buying it. Go to Sanshui County, get a stall, make the dough, and then use the oil to fry it to sell it to other people to eat. When they’ve eaten it, of course that flavor wouldn’t be the same. They’ll ask you or you can find someone to deliberately ask—understand?”

Zhang Xiaobao gave a bit of guidance and Song Jing-gong immediately understood: “I know. Then, I’ll say that it’s the oil that’s good.”

Notes:

[1\]](#) I translated “shai gu chang” (曬穀場) literally because I couldn’t find an English equivalent for the term. This is the name of a broad and open space where the grain crops would be laid out on the ground to dry in the sun before it was to be further processed. Farming households might use their central courtyard as one and farming villages might have a communal space specifically set aside for this purpose. Here are a couple of pictures that show these places and how people would use them: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#).

[2\]](#) “Dao sui” (稻穗) means “rice paddy” in Chinese. Paddy is the term that you would call a stalk of rice by.

[3\]](#) “Mai sui” (麥穗) means “wheat ear” in Chinese. Wheat stalks bearing the grain are called ears in English.

[4\]](#) The original Chinese used here is “jiao zhu” (交銖) but I think it might be a typo since the Chinese for “pay rent” is nearly homophonous and is “jiao zu” (交租). The reason why I think the original Chinese was incorrect is because zhu/銖 could refer to currency coins since they were measured in a measurement unit for weight, zhu/銖, which were ~0.68 grams. For reference, the official currency of the [Qin dynasty](#), a [half-tael](#) or “[ban liang](#)” (半兩), was 12 zhu/銖 in weight. However, as mentioned before in the story, at this time, peasants rarely dealt with actual currency if they could simply trade or barter for it in goods. Most likely, their rent was in the form of a portion of their harvest and they wouldn’t need to go to the effort of exchanging their harvest for coin just to pay their rent when their landlords would accept the goods in exchange for rent anyway.

5] The Chinese term used here to describe the food is “you si bing” (油絲餅) but I wasn’t able to fully verify what it could be (there are a lot of [bing](#)/餅 in Chinese cuisine). The name breaks down to “oil strand cake.” A “si bing” (絲餅) whose name can be translated into English as “silk/strand bread” was the closest I got but might just be a bread or bake with a similar name. I assume that this is a flat cake that’s fried in oil and made out of strands of wheat flour though.

6] [Threshing](#) in Chinese is “da guzi” (打穀子), which translates to “hitting the grains” as that was what threshing grain crops by hand actually entailed—flailing the ear of grain, which was laborious without any automation or machinery and could take hours, if not days.

7] The author wrote “shuozhe wu xin, tingzhe you yi” (說者無心, 聽者有意), which is a common Chinese expression to describe a situation where words can be heard and interpreted by the listener in a way that was unintended by the speaker. There’s no readily attributable source for this expression though. Since it was a fairly compact phrase with two 4-character couplets, I was worried that my truncated translation wouldn’t convey the full meaning. By the way, wordplay is possible by switching around or flipping some of the words to mean the opposite and such.

8] Broken down into its individual characters, “xin you ling xi” (心有靈犀) works out to be “heart has spiritual horn.” This is a partial quote of a line from an untitled poem by [Tang dynasty](#) poet, [Li Shangyin](#) (李商隱). The full line is “心有靈犀一點通” which means “hearts have a spiritual horn that link at one point.” The full poem used animals as metaphors for the emotional link that could be

shared between lovers. The reason for this particular imagery is because of the mistaken belief that the Chinese had about a type of rhinoceros with 3 horns where 1 horn was on its nose, 1 on its forehead, and 1 on the crown of its head. They believed that the very top horn on its crown bore a white grooved pattern that connected it to the rest of the body so the Chinese called it a spiritual horn. Thus, this saying is borne from the belief that if the heart had such a spiritual horn, then a connection or link to other hearts could be made. Because it was impossible to convey this in text, I translated this idiom by replacing it with a roughly equivalent English expression.

9] The [Taihang Mountains](#) (太行山) are a mountain range that spanned the [Shanxi](#) (山西), [Henan](#) (河南), and [Hebei](#) (河北) provinces in China.

10] [Henan](#) (河南) is a province in China whose name means “south of the river.” However, a quarter of the province actually lies north of the [Yellow River](#) or “Huang He” (黄河). Henan is also known as the central lands or “zhong zhou” (中州) as it is considered the cradle of Chinese civilization. Its other nickname of “zhong yuan” (中原) or “[central plains](#)” can also be a name for [China proper](#) as a reflection of its self-image as the center of the world.

11] [Shandong](#) (山東) is a coastal province of China in its eastern region. One of the most revered mountains in [Daoism](#), [Mount Tai](#) (泰山), is located here along with many other important Daoist places. It is also known to be the location of many important religious and cultural sites for [Buddhism](#) and [Confucianism](#) as well.

[12\]](#) Because the first books and thus historical records used to be recorded on bamboo strips that got very heavy with only a few amount of characters written, they tended to be written very tersely for the sake of the historian's back (and why Chinese has so many 4-character idioms and so many different connotations for the same characters depending on the context). Xiaobao's speech patterns mimic that brevity even though he's only paraphrasing. So he just says Tang/唐 which is short for Tang dynasty, the way it would be written in the historical records.

[13\]](#) “Huang zai” (蝗災) literally means “[locust](#) disaster.” In case people aren't aware, locust is how grasshoppers are referred to when they go into their swarming phase. What's interesting to note is that the character for locust in Chinese, huang/蝗, is a homophone for one of the characters that comprise the title of “emperor,” huang/皇. So when you realize that they thought that a plague of locusts was a sign of displeasure from the heavens and that the Emperor of China was considered the [Son of Heaven](#), it only caused people to be even more unreasonably superstitious about locusts in ancient China.

[14\]](#) “Zhen zhen you ci” ([振振有辭](#)) is basically a polite euphemism that describes when someone is saying bullshit in a verbose and eloquent manner, which is what Xiaobao is doing right now.

[15\]](#) Juan-Juan is referring to one of the many lessons from [Confucius](#) (Kongzi/孔子) that spoke of how to be a good person. I can't pinpoint it though so I will need to add it into this footnote later when I do.

[16\]](#) The Chinese expression used here is “zuo zei xin xu” ([做賊心虛](#))

which literally breaks down into “being thief, heart (is) weak.” It describes someone who does something wrong like stealing and is afraid of being discovered or caught. Thus, having a weak heart can mean having a guilty conscience or acting guilty. So this is an idiom that usually applies to anyone being surreptitious or scared when they are doing something they think (or know) is wrong.

Chapter 33: Giving A Large Present Deep Into Autumn

The fallen leaves had been exhausted; there were already no vestiges of the grass; the verdant pines and cypresses¹ were as old, vividly dyeing the autumn wind.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan already added on new layers of clothing to their bodies. As Xiaohong was idle with nothing to do, she'd woken up very early to herd the ducks and geese that Yingtao had hatched towards that pond that belonged to her.

The maid who accompanied them by their side became Shiliu whose duties had lessened. Song Jing-gong sold soybean oil until he grew addicted to selling and would only return to give a report once every few days. Daniu was still responsible for selling the sauce as well as carrots.

“Looks like it’s almost winter. When it snows, what things does winter have that makes money?” Wang Juan carried two small sandbags in her hands, lightly swinging them about while she chatted with Zhang Xiaobao.

“Don’t know. At least the manor has kang [bed-stove] so no fear of freezing.” Over there, Zhang Xiaobao was holding two sandbags as well.

“I’m actually worried that your family’s manor won’t get past this year. There were a lot of grain crops everywhere for the fall harvest but there are also people who would remember this place.”

Throwing the sandbag far off into the distance, Wang Juan nearly got pulled along with it into a tumble in a moment of distraction.

Zhang Xiaobao was rather more careful as the sandbags that he threw were a bit further away than those two of Wang Juan's. Trotting over to pick them up, he hesitated for a bit before he said: "No fear. If people come this year, there's also a way to deal with them."

Because they wore a lot of clothing, the two of them only played for an hour before their bodies got covered in sweat. Over there, Shiliu had already prepared the hot water and seeing that the day had gradually darkened, she suggested next to them: "Little Mister, Little Miss, it's gotten windy outside. Why not go inside to play?"

The two of them made a sound in confirmation before turning around to return with Shiliu. It was at this time that Song Jing-gong, who had already returned once yesterday, ran inside the courtyard in a rush and upon seeing Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, that normally calm face revealed a worried expression.

"For Zijin to run with such urgency, could it be that you've been met with good news?" Zhang Xiaobao heard the footstep sounds and turned his head to look. When he saw that it was Song Jing-gong, he asked this with a smile.

"My little ancestor, how is there good news? Something big has come up. Little Mister, the business over there can't be done anymore." Seeing that Little Mister still had the leisure to banter, Song Jing-gong's expression grew even more pained.

Wang Juan interrupted as she said: “Could it be that Mister Song has a matter that he can’t accomplish? Back then, you sure did swindle quite a few people, why can’t you handle it today?”

“My little ancestor, ah, this time is not the same as in the past. Can’t swindle, ah! Sanshui County over there has people who claim that they had issues after eating the soybean oil sold by Zhang Manor. They found a doctor to check who said that there was poison so business can’t be easily done.”

Song Jing-gong, bearing a face full of frustration, carefully relayed the matter over there.

Yesterday, Song Jing-gong had returned to Sanshui County to sell soybean oil while selling tofu there as well. Money could be used to buy them and other items could also be used to barter for them, especially soybeans as 1 catty of soybeans could get 2 catties of tofu in exchange. With such a setup, it didn’t allow people to realize that soybean oil was made using soybeans.

The evening of that day, when Song Jing-gong had been about to have his people pack away the booth stall, a group of men came by. Song Jing-gong recognized them since several of them were ne’er-do-wells² who were always up to no good. At first, he thought that they came over to forcibly collect money. Only when the men came close did he know that they were buying oil—a total of 20 catties.

At the time, Song Jing-gong didn’t think too much of it and sold it to the men.

Who knew that when he had just come out of 'Noteworthy House' this morning that those men would come over to find him and even had a doctor in tow to give testimony. They claimed that after returning with the oil that they had bought yesterday night, a person had gotten sick from eating it. The men had even carried the one from among them who had gotten ill to place in front of the stall as proof.

Song Jing-gong knew then that he was being extorted. So seeing the people who were looking on in a surrounding circle over there, he spoke out in explanation. But who knew that doctor would insist with a clenched jaw³ that the person lying there had grown sick from eating the oil that this stall sold. The conclusiveness of his words caused the people to be unable to not believe them.

Those men didn't say any threatening words but wanted Song Jing-gong to give them 50 taels in silver ingots. The surrounding people didn't know who to trust. Hearing those men's meaning, they thought that they just wanted more money but to have grown sick from eating it and to also have a doctor's testimony, they also grew unsure in that instant.

Seeing this, Song Jing-gong also knew that there was no way to do business so he hastily packed up the stall and ordered his people to have all of the items sent back to Noteworthy House. After telling those men to come back again tomorrow, he then hurriedly rushed back to the manor.

"Oh, so it's like that." Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan nodded their heads simultaneously but didn't reveal any expression of

having been troubled.

“With illegal appropriation as the purpose, the methods used against the victim are threats or blackmail and is behavior that forcibly demands public or private possessions. This is extortion and racketeering. Xiaobao, it’s up to you.”

Wang Juan spat out a string of words before turning her head to look at Zhang Xiaobao. That meaning was to see how Zhang Xiaobao wanted to handle it from now on.

Zhang Xiaobao curled his lips as if unwilling to handle this kind of thing and sighed: “It looks like we’ll need to spend money again.”

“Little Mister, could it be that you want to give them money?” Upon hearing Zhang Xiaobao’s words, Song Jing-gong thought that he was choosing to give the money and urged: “Little Mister, it can’t be given, ~ah! If it’s given today, then they’ll come back again tomorrow. Besides, that Sanshui County also has some other street punks⁴ who’d see that there was profit to be had and will come to the stall in turns—however much money, it all won’t be enough to give.”

“Who said to give them money? For me to make a bit of money isn’t easy, either. If it needs to be spent, it should be spent someplace useful. You’ll return today and ask around to see what people those men have in their families. Then, use your identity as a Juren to go see the Sanshui County Magistrate.⁵ Bring 100 taels of silver ingots as well as that spicy sauce from my manor and the

soybean oil that you're selling."

Zhang Xiaobao naturally wouldn't give people money for free. Considering that Tuqiao Village was also under Sanshui County's control, they could be useful next year. Taking care of them⁶ first was always better than giving when needed.

Song Jing-gong didn't know this so upon hearing 100 taels in silver ingots, he couldn't help trembling. Gulping down his saliva, he said:

"Little Mister, those men don't really want 50 taels. They'd be content to be able to extort 10 taels or 8 silver taels. 100 taels? Isn't that a bit much? Promise me 20 taels and I'll be able to have that county magistrate help out."

Song Jing-gong didn't speak erroneously here. 100 silver taels were a bit too much. Customarily, a small matter only required 10 taels or 5 silver taels to be given for the county magistrate to be accommodating.

Without waiting for Zhang Xiaobao to speak, Wang Juan over there had already spoken up and said: "Mister Song, do everything according to what Xiaobao says. Throwing the money out there is to show off an attitude to let those people who are thinking of targeting us know as well as to give the county magistrate a warning."

"What warning?" Song Jing-gong really didn't understand even though he'd swindled quite a few people.

“Let him know that these 100 silver taels can find their way to him for the sake of a petty matter but can also be sent over his head to his superior to find his errors. If it weren’t because there isn’t much spare money on hand and had all entirely been exchanged for food grains, why not throw 200 taels straight at him? Next year, it’ll come in handy.”

Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao could be considered to have a tacit understanding so she was clear on what matters Zhang Xiaobao was deliberating over and also knew the methods for dealing with this type of person.

Song Jing-gong thought on it for a while before he finally understood and nodded his head: “It still is Little Mister and Little Miss who’s formidable. I’ll go and do this now.”

That said, Song Jing-gong was anxious over the matters on that side so he hurriedly left, leaving behind Shiliu and the three of them to continue walking toward the room.

“Little Mister, the matter that Mister Song spoke of just now when he came, I was terrified and didn’t know what to do. It’s unbelievable that Little Mister has so easily straightened things out. With this sort of matter, Little Mister seems to not be afraid of it one bit.”

As Shiliu gave the two of them baths, she was also sighing in praise there.

“Shiliu, you have to remember that any of this type of swindling business that’s encountered, Xiaobao won’t fear at all. This matter might not be so easily resolved. It’s best if that magistrate also dares not handle it. But since he accepted our silver, getting him to do things for us will be a bit easier in the future.”

Wang Juan didn’t mind that there were people doing this type of thing, too. With such petty tricks, they were worthless to one such as Zhang Xiaobao.

Zhang Xiaobao also spoke out in agreement: “Indeed. I even hope that those men’s identities are a bit higher. At the very least, that their families have formidable people present. There’s no fear in spending money when you really want to accomplish something. What’s scary is to not have any place to send money to.”

“Little Mister and Little Miss speak profoundly. Shiliu basically doesn’t understand, ~ne.” After hearing the two little ancestors’ words, Shiliu felt that she herself was really dumb.

“Shiliu, you don’t need to feel bad, either. From now, listen more and observe more and you’ll understand. Those matters that you were assigned to do, you’ve done very well at.” Wang Juan was afraid of Shiliu losing confidence so hastened to comfort her.

Song Jing-gong left the manor as he rushed back. When it was evening, he finally got back to Sanshui County here. Getting the silver from Noteworthy House and bringing the soybean oil and spicy sauce along with him, he directly went to the county seat⁷ without the slightest delay.

The county magistrate Cheng Lingxiang⁸ Song Jing-gong had met twice before. After giving the gatekeeper several wen [cash] in copper coins and they'd finished giving notice of his arrival, the gatekeeper retreated inside while stating that the magistrate invited him.

Passing through two doors, when he arrived at the study, Song Jing-gong directly saluted:⁹ “Student¹⁰ Song Jing-gong gives greeting to Magistrate.”

“Juren Song needs not be polite. Quickly, please sit. I hear that Juren Song has done several good deeds for the sake of the people¹¹ of my Sanshui County. I've wanted to meet Juren Song at least once but unfortunately, the county affairs have been numerous and hectic so I wasn't able to find the opportunity at the time. In coming here today, Juren Song has fulfilled one of my heart's desires.”

For Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang, their seeing Song Jing-gong was in consideration of his possession of an honorary title so they were also polite.

“Lord¹² Magistrate really makes Student feel such overwhelming favor¹³ to be able to be remembered by Milord. In the future, Student Zijin will certainly comply with Milord's teachings and wholeheartedly work for the sake of the people. Student arrived in a hurry and couldn't prepare any decent thing. Only some vegetable oil and spicy sauce—poor and shabby.”

Song Jing-gong hadn't handed over the things that he carried to anyone else and had directly brought them to the study. As he spoke respectfully, he slowly placed that large bundle on top of the desk. The oil and sauce was mostly packaged in jars so they made a slight sound.

But that silver was 10 taels of 10 ingots. To get such proper silver was really not easy, ~ne. One move and they made such a crisp noise. After hearing it, Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang's eyes brightened and gestured for Song Jing-gong to drink tea. He seemed to feel as if that bundle of stuff was a bit of a hindrance and used his hands to push it to the side. During the process of pushing it, his hands grasped the area with the silver.

With this grab, Cheng Lingxiang's face couldn't help changing. Estimating it for a bit, he roughly knew how much silver there was. This much money? What did this Song Jing-gong want to do? Could it be that he had killed someone and wanted him to commute the sentence?¹⁴ That was rather hard to accomplish. But since this 'reason'¹⁵ was so great, he could think of a way where appropriate.

"Good, I've already heard of this sauce before so I can try it now. Zijin shows care.¹⁶ Don't know what Zijin has been busy with recently?" Cheng Lingxiang started to deliberate on how to deal with the matter.

"In reply to Milord's words, Student, feeling that there was no hope in another test attempt,¹⁷ found a reasonably good manor a few days ago to work in as an aide. This oil and sauce was produced

by that manor. But who knew... Ai~! It's not worth mentioning. Coming here today was to call upon Milord."

As Song Jing-gong spoke, his face was relaxed at first but afterward, accompanying that sigh, it turned into a downcast and crestfallen¹⁸ appearance.

Notes:

1] The Chinese used here is "song bai" (松柏), which can either refer to [evergreen trees](#) in general or names two individual types of trees, which are [pines](#) or "song shu" (松樹) and "bai shu" (柏樹), a species of tree native to China that is a close relative to cypresses and junipers whose Latin name is [Platycladus orientalis](#) and which I've translated as "cypress" for brevity's sake since it is categorized under the family of [Cupressaceae](#).

2] "You shou hao xian" (遊手好閒) is the Chinese expression used here and breaks down to mean "play hand, so idle." So this is an idiom used to describe people who are idle and loaf around with nothing to do on their hands so they "play" around all day by loitering or doing senseless things. Because of the negative connotations of this phrase, I translated it as "[ne'er-do-well](#)."

3] "I've translated "yi kou yao ding" (一口咬定) as "insist with clenched jaw" though it literally means "to bite firmly with one mouth." This is basically an idiom that is used in cases where the person being so described is so insistent that they might as well be a dog that's clamped down its jaws after biting something and refuses to let go.

4] I've translated “hun hun” (混混) as “street punks” though other possible word choices are hustlers or (neighborhood) bullies or hoodlums. This is a slang term in Chinese that labels those petty crooks who are small fries in the criminal underworld so it is the most eclectic in terms of demographic since it can include kids who are playing at being thugs and getting into street fights as well as petty crooks who are bottom of the rung in the underworld but still considered actual members in criminal enterprises. This makes sense when you realize “hun hun” (混混) is literally the character for “mixing, bumbling along” or hun/混 repeated twice.

5] A “xian ling” (縣令) is the official in charge of a county or xian/縣 and literally means “county command.” I should translate it fully as “county magistrate” but for the sake of brevity and avoiding redundancy, I am going to be using just “magistrate.” Other possible terms that it can be translated as are “prefect” or “governor.” However, to avoid confusion for when higher level government officials enter the picture, I chose “magistrate” to reflect the judiciary role this particular official can play in the local government of ancient China.

6] “Da dian” (打點) literally means “hit point/bit” in Chinese and is slang for bribing or giving money to someone in order to establish a connection to or relationship with them. Because “da dian” (打點) can also be used in everyday life to describe putting your affairs in order or getting ready (by hitting each point of your checklist of preparations), it also adds the connotation of using the bribe as groundwork for the future.

7] “Xian ya” (縣衙) refers to the public office and official residence of the county. This was because a “[ya men](#)” (衙門) was typically not

just the general administrative office where the bureaucratic paperwork and the legislative and judicial proceedings occurred but also where the leading government official resided. Since ya/衙 was the generic character referring to the official administrative office of any government official or [mandarin](#) in China, the character that I have translated as “county,” xian/縣, is required to differentiate what level of governmental office it was. For these reasons, I have chosen to use “[county seat](#)” in my translation.

[8\]](#) The county magistrate has the surname of Cheng/程 and a given name of Lingxiang (嶺祥), which is a combination of the characters for “mountain peak or ridge” (ling/嶺) and “auspicious or good luck” (xiang/祥).

[9\]](#) The Chinese used here is “xing li” (行禮), which means “to perform etiquette/rite,” which just means he did an action or gesture that was courtesy but doesn’t specify whether Song Jing-gong bows or nodded his head or cupped his hand in salute as greeting. So I had to translate it as a general “salute.”

[10\]](#) Song Jing-gong is emphasizing that he is considered a member of the [scholar-gentry class](#) though he doesn’t hold a position as a government official by referring to himself in the third person as “Student” or “xue sheng” (學生). It is technically correct since for anyone to pass the [civil exams](#) in ancient China, they would have to be scholars that studied the [Confucian texts](#) and were considered students of [Confucius](#). The language Song Jing-gong uses here is polite but neutral in tone, being neither arrogant or humble, which you can tell since with humble speech patterns in Chinese, the speaker always claims to be lower in status than they really are as a sign that they’re trying to be modest or submissive. Most likely, Song Jing-gong self-identifying as

“Student” is a subtle but inoffensive way to present himself as a peer to the magistrate who is only slightly lower in rank.

[11](#)] Cheng Lingxiang uses “[bai xing](#)” (百姓) which literally means “hundred surnames” to refer to the people. This is a term that comes up often in historical fiction set in Asia because it was the standard way to refer to the commoners or “the people” back then since due to the patrilineal inheritance of surnames, there were only around a couple hundred characters that were in use as surnames in ancient China. Note that this term is also associated with the classic [Song dynasty](#) text that compiled all of the common [Chinese surnames](#) called “Bai Jia Xing” (百家姓) or “[Hundred Family Surnames](#)” and was one of the introductory textbooks for Chinese students in ancient China post-Song dynasty. Compare “bai xing” (百姓) to how the modern day Chinese government refers to the populace nowadays, which is usually a variation on “ren min” (人民), which also means “the people” but has an added connotation of “citizenry.”

[12](#)] “Da ren” (大人) can either mean “adult, grownup” or “lord” in Chinese. Obviously, the meaning of “lord” is intended here. Sometimes, I will translate this term as “[Milord](#)” for grammatical purposes in English if the speaker is using it as a title to address the person they’re talking to even though there is no “my” in the original Chinese. Also, just translating as “Lord” without a “my” in there makes it appear like they are speaking of God because of the Judeo-Christian implications in English.

[13](#)] The Chinese idiom used here is “shou chong ruo jing” ([受寵若驚](#)) and means “to receive such favor so as to be overwhelmed/surprised.” Usage of this phrase emphasizes the humility of the person receiving the compliment since they are

taken by surprise as well as to praise the person giving the compliment as one whose favor is valued by the one being so praised so it is one of those courtesy phrases Chinese people will say by rote since it rarely offends anyone and gives face.

[14\]](#) “Gai pan” (改判) literally means “to change the sentence/judgment” but since it’s usually changing the sentence to a lesser one, I opted to translate it as “commute the sentence.”

[15\]](#) Li/理 has different connotations as a character in Chinese as it can mean “logic, reason, or truth.” The reason why Cheng Lingxiang uses this character is because it is a homophone for the character li/禮 which can mean “gift” but can also mean “courtesy” or “ritual.” So there is a bit of wordplay involved here that is euphemistically referring to the bribery.

[16\]](#) “You xin” (有心) literally means “has heart” and is another one of those idioms that are spoken as a courtesy in Chinese, which basically says that the person who “has heart” was conscientious and considerate for taking the time to do or say something. To try to approximate the brevity of the phrase as well as to summarize the meaning, I translated it as “shows care.”

[17\]](#) Song Jing-gong is referring to the fact that barring anything that disqualified the candidate such as being caught for cheating and being banned for life, a test candidate who didn’t pass a round of the [civil exams](#) could attempt it again the next time it came around. This applied for all levels of the exams so it was entirely possible for a man who only passed the county level exam to become a xiucai (秀才) to keep trying (but failing) until he was an elderly man to progress to become a Juren (舉人). There is a reason

why a “poor xiucai” (窮秀才) is a stereotypical image in ancient China as it was too easy for the families of candidates to grow poor from supporting them through multiple failed test attempts. Song Jing-gong passed the prefectural or state level exam to become a Juren (舉人) but obviously failed to pass the preliminary national exam to become a Jinshi (進士). Once you gained a Jinshi (進士) degree though, you were not allowed to retake the test anymore, which is why some scholars would choose to skip the national test after passing the prefectural level to take the time off to study more in order to try to increase their chances for either passing or getting a better test result and higher rank for next time. This strategy was a calculated risk though since they couldn’t guarantee whether the candidates next time would be more competitive than this time or if they would run across compatible test judges or topics. So it was also very common to have candidates voluntarily choose to stop seeking a higher degree and re-attempt the exam if they decided that it would be too costly in time, money, or effort.

[18\]](#) The 4-character couplet used here is “chui tou sang qi” ([垂頭喪氣](#)), which roughly translates to “hanging head, mournful air.”

Chapter 34: To Predict Matters First Isn't Strange

Of course, Cheng Lingxiang didn't assume that Song Jing-gong didn't wish to speak. It was nothing more than waiting for him to ask about it. So for the sake of the silver, he asked anyway.

“For Zijin to speak thusly is to see me as an outsider. Is there something that's not going well? Speak of it so we can discuss it in detail together—it'd be better than you suppressing it in your heart on your own.”

“Since Milord has asked about it, Student will naturally obey. It's this vegetable oil. It sold well over these few days but in the end, it attracted trouble. The morning actually had some street punks run over to the location of my booth selling the oil to claim that there was someone who had gotten poisoned from eating it and even found a doctor to provide testimony.

How could Student have encountered such matters before? Those men insisted on Student giving them 50 silver taels. Student works as an aide for others so just where could 50 silver taels be found? It really couldn't be helped, ~ah. If the money still isn't given tomorrow, perhaps those men will go grab Student to see them in court.¹

Quite a lot of vegetable oil was sold over these past few days along with those deep-fried items in the morning that had been made using this oil. If it really had poison, why is it that only one person was poisoned and the others are fine? Student really wishes

to argue but has no words, ~ah.”

Song Jing-gong spoke while shaking his head and sighing, causing anyone who saw him to think that it really was like that.

Cheng Lingxiang glanced at the package on the table. The silver there was more than what they were asking for. No money? If there's no money, then how are you bringing it over to me? It was fine though. It wasn't a big deal. It was just a bunch of street punks who wanted to extort some money. I didn't think that Song Jing-gong's temper would actually be so large and that he would rather take out even more money to give to me than to give it to those street punks though.

Fine, at least he himself gained some benefits. Only, this money was really a bit much. Could it be that he wished to let him have these men thrown into jail? Then, sentence them as felonies—this still required some inquiry to be feasible.

“Really, how outrageous!² Zijin, rest assured. This county³ will decide for you. Today, you go and write an appeal;⁴ send it here tomorrow morning. This county will definitely thoroughly put away those men who damage others' wealth and reputation.”

“Milord does not need to be so angered. Sanshui County here could be said to be secure and prosperous from Milord's administration. Only those few who are blind⁵ would even dare to be like this so this sentencing wouldn't be required if Milord could be requested to help with the persuasion. Under Milord's governance, it can be assumed that there wouldn't be those kinds

of unreasonable people.”

Song Jing-gong advanced with a retreat⁶ and applied pressure with his praise to see just what the county magistrate would do.

“Zijin speaks truly. Then how about this? Wait for tomorrow so I can send people to find and bring over those men to clear Zijin’s reputation. Zijin doesn’t need to worry. Oh, the day is late. Zijin probably hasn’t taken in food yet—why not eat a bite or two here?”

Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang naturally understood that to not care about this matter wasn’t possible. It was good that they didn’t force it too much. From now on, it looked like if they had issues, he’d still need to help out, ~ah. Otherwise, accepting this much money would scald his hands.

“Many thanks, Milord. Dinner has already been prepared back home and there are people waiting for Student to return so it would be inconvenient to be so bothersome. Milord is busy so please prioritize the body. Student will bid farewell here.”

Seeing that the matter was nearly over with and that sending the guest away⁷ had already begun, Song Jing-gong stood up and gave another salute before respectfully turning around to leave. Behind him, the sound of ‘Escort Mister Song out for me’ could also be heard.

The morning of the second day, Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang sought out people to ask after this matter. Finally, those people under him all knew of it. Once the matter was relayed, Cheng

Lingxiang suddenly felt a headache. Why did they have to encounter this wastrel,⁸ ~ne? It could more easily handled if it were any other person. So he could only command someone to go find Song Jing-gong as he had to discuss this thoroughly for a bit.

Obeying the summons, Song Jing-gong hurriedly rushed over and upon seeing the county magistrate and his facial expression, knew that this matter was going to be hard to accomplish. Without waiting for him to speak, ~ne, Cheng Lingxiang had already begun talking.

“Zijin, ~ah, I’ve already found out yesterday that the person leading them is Zhou Xihu,⁹ the nephew [fraternal]¹⁰ of this prefecture’s¹¹ Military Depot Officer¹² Zhou Kong.¹³ I will go call him over to ask today. If he is really missing 50 silver taels, then I’ll just give it to him. If it’s not like that, then Zijin will have to make other plans.”

Cheng Lingxiang really didn’t have any methods he could think of, either. If they really wanted money, then big deal—just hand over half of the yesterday’s silver to them. But he feared that their designs were on something else. Then that couldn’t be dismissed with just 50 silver taels.

Hearing this, Song Jing-gong also knew it was trouble. The Prefectural Military Depot Officer, which was the prefectural division chief¹⁴ who assisted the Prefectural Governor¹⁵ in managing the taxes and warehouse, an official of the 6th full rank.¹⁶ A county magistrate didn’t dare easily offend them, either. He saw that he really would need to ask for clarification before

thinking of another way. So he said:

“For Milord to tell Zijin the truth, Zijin is endlessly grateful. Here, Zijin will go back to wait for the news. If that Zhou Xihu is only asking for 50 silver taels, Zijin would definitely offer it up. If... Zijin will need to return to the manor to discuss it. Kindly request of Milord to please help delay for a day—at most a day for a certain result.”

“Oh? A solution can be had after only 1 day? Zijin, rest assured. No need to be anxious. To delay him for 3 or 5 days is still possible. After all, 1 day is a bit short—only enough time for Zijin to leave and return.”

Cheng Lingxiang assumed that Song Jing-gong had grown confused from worry but having taken the money, he naturally had to provide a bit more help.

“No need. Once Zijin returns to the manor, there’ll be a solution. To be able to return here straight away, 1 day is enough.” Song Jing-gong said with certainty.

“If that’s so, then Zijin should first go back and wait. When I’ve finished asking Zhou Xihu, I’ll have someone inform Zijin. This official, I¹⁷ can see that Zijin has such certainty—could it be that there is an adept at the manor?” Upon seeing Song Jing-gong’s gaze was genuinely calm, Cheng Lingxiang had grown rather curious.

When Song Jing-gong thought of how he had lost in the first

place and then the money made in deal after deal that he had witnessed afterwards, his face gained more than a hint of reverence as he nodded his head.

“Correct. This matter would be difficulty piled upon difficulty for Student but for that person, they’d scorn even ruminating over it. When that person is unmoving, they are as a peaceful breeze and gentle sun; when they move, they are like a fierce gale and torrential rain. Student had the fortune to experience it once and then, went over there to become an aide.”

County Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang knew that this Song Jing-gong had previously swindled some people and his methods were uncommonly extraordinary so hadn’t thought that he’d actually ever lose, too. Feeling it to be even more interesting now, he asked: “Could it be that Zijin fears that person?”

“Afraid, really afraid. Just once and Student nearly didn’t even have the chance of turning things around. Afterward, that person even let me go.¹⁸ Otherwise, I would be inside the county jail at this moment. And the person by that person’s side—these two people gathered together are like the union of the qin [zither] and xiao [flute],¹⁹ the admiration of the world, second to no other.”²⁰

Thinking of Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan at the manor, a trace of a smile appeared at the corner of Song Jing-gong’s mouth that even bore just a little bit of pride.

“If that’s so, then Zijin should go back first. Here, I will do this as quickly as possible.”

Cheng Lingxiang, seeing that Song Jing-gong spoke of the two people over there like they were divine sages, didn't even believe him. But he could still use the incident this time to ask. Within his heart, he already had some considerations. Zhou Xihu wouldn't lack that little bit of silver and would definitely have a greater scheme so he'd just see how that adept at the manor would handle it.

Song Jing-gong replied in confirmation before returning to wait. Cheng Lingxiang hastened to order people to go find Zhou Xihu to ask him in person. Zhou Xihu didn't even deny it and directly spoke out loud his own intentions. He wished to acquire the recipe for that vegetable oil. He had used that oil before and for these past few days, he'd been using vegetable oil for every meal. The flavor was better than any of the other oils and even if it were used to light lamps with, the smoke was lesser, too.

Seeing their intentions were like so, Cheng Lingxiang didn't comment either and had people tell Song Jing-gong of this matter. As for what to do, then they'd have to look to that adept that Song Jing-gong had spoken of.

Upon receiving the news, Song Jing-gong hired a carriage and quickly galloped in return. After entering the courtyard house, not even taking care to drink a sip of water, he blurted it all out before looking at Little Mister as he waited.

Just as he thought, when Little Mister and Little Miss heard this news, they weren't a bit worried. Not only were they not concerned, they even smiled.

“Little Mister, there’s a countermeasure?” Song Jing-gong, seeing that Little Mister and the two weren’t anxious, also began to relax.

“Xiaobao, you’ve guessed it right again. This is good now. For the new year,²¹ let us eat candied gourd fruit.”²² Wang Juan said as she smiled at Zhang Xiaobao.

Zhang Xiaobao, deliberately holding back, also nodded: “Unh, have Shiliu take the things out and hand them over to Zijin. Zijin, I’ll tell you what to do.”

Having Shiliu take out the stuff and give it to Song Jing-gong, Zhang Xiaobao then spoke to Song Jing-gong. Song Jing-gong’s eyes brightened as he enthusiastically nodded his head: “Little Mister, you [honorific] rest assured. I’ll definitely handle this matter. So it was originally like this. The matter shouldn’t wait. I’ll go now.”

After giving his guarantee, Song Jing-gong, carrying the broth²³ that Shiliu had prepared for him, turned around to exit as he had the coachman drive the carriage back towards Sanshui County over there.

When Song Jing-gong had arrived, it was nighttime again. This time, Song Jing-gong was like before as he didn’t stop to rest before going over to the yamen [govt. offices]²⁴ here. Once he caught sight of the magistrate, he said his request:

“Milord, Student has returned and asks Milord to help out by acting as a middle man. Since it is dinner time, Student desires to invite that Zhou Xihu to dine at Waterview House.”

Cheng Lingxiang, seeing Song Jing-gong’s face was colored with pleasure, felt much surprise. Could it be that there really was a way to resolve the issue? Calculating the time it would take for Song Jing-gong to make a round trip, he had just gotten back there when over there, someone had already thought of a method. How was this possible?

“Zijin has a plan? The adept over there thought of a way in a while after hearing your words?”

Cheng Lingxiang asked with some expectation.

“No, Student had just entered the courtyard house and finished speaking of the matter when that person had Student take the item that had already been prepared in advance and then instructed Student a few words. Student didn’t dare delay and immediately came back here. They seemed to already know.”

Whenever Song Jing-gong recollected the circumstances of his return, his whole body shook with excitement. Little Mister, they really were too terrifying. Today, he finally witnessed what calculations that overlooked nothing really was. Zhuge reborn could only be like so.

Cheng Lingxiang shared in the surprise together with him, too. It

looked like that manor really did have adepts, ~ah. Right then, he didn't even hesitate so while he sent over people to go invite Zhou Xihu, he brought Song Jing-gong along with him to walk toward Waterview House. He didn't even ride a carriage or palanquin,²⁵ walking while he asked.

“Could Zijin divulge on what idea that person came up with? I am curious here.”

This time, Song Jing-gong didn't directly reveal it and apologetically smiled: “Milord, forgive Student for not being able to tell this time. When Zhou Xihu has arrived, everything will naturally be revealed.”

“Oh? If so, then let's wait for a while. I've heard it said that several dishes in Waterview House were all produced by that manor of yours. What connection is there with that adept?”

Seeing that Song Jing-gong wasn't speaking, Cheng Lingxiang didn't force him to, either. In a bit, he'd be able to find out anyway. Thinking of Waterview House's new dishes, he casually asked about it.

“Milord indeed has eyes bright as torches.²⁶ The vegetable oil, spicy sauce, and those dishes were really all by that person.”

As Song Jing-gong conversed with the magistrate, they arrived at the Waterview House. Zhou Xihu had already arrived first and requested a single room so upon seeing Song Jing-gong, he spoke up and said: “What? Mister Song has thought it through?”

Notes:

1] The Chinese expression used here of “jian guan” (見官) literally means to “see the official,” which is an euphemism for a court appearance since for most people, seeing a court official is the same as seeing a judge and that implies appearing in court as either the plaintiff or defendant in a lawsuit. For these reasons, I have translated for the gist rather than the literal meaning.

2] “Qi you ci li” (豈有此理) translates to “how could there be such logic.” You will likely see this as an outburst in a lot of historical Chinese settings, fictional or otherwise, as this is an idiom that’s perfectly suited for politely and elegantly saying WTF in Chinese. In order to try to encapsulate the brevity of this phrase (it’s only 4 syllables and can be said pretty quickly) along with its meaning, I’ve simply translated it as “outrageous.”

3] Cheng Lingxiang literally uses “ben xian” (本縣) or “this county” to refer to himself because he legally could represent the county itself because of the office he holds.

4] I’ve translated “zhuangzi” (狀子) as “appeal” though when you break it down, it basically means “form.” It is really more of a general term for a legal document or brief that could be submitted to open a case or investigation with the ancient Chinese courts. Since most of the cases that people could request opened ranged in severity from civil issues like inheritance rights or property disputes to criminal matters like a grievance or accusations of wrongdoing, the one who submitted the appeal was basically treated as a plaintiff, even in murder cases. Note that murder cases

with plaintiffs were usually because the plaintiff suspected the individual who had previously been assumed to have died of natural causes of really being a victim of homicide and/or had a possible suspect who they wished to accuse so this would be a situation where the courts combined the investigation and judicial proceedings in one.

5] I chose to translate this as “blind” though Song Jing-gong actually says “bu kai yan” (不開眼) or “not opening (their) eyes.”

6] “Advance with a retreat” is how I literally translated this 4-character couplet “yi tui wei jin” (以退為進), which poses the idea of adopting a conciliatory attitude where concessions are made or there is a visible and momentary retreat in order to advance a greater strategy or goal. This is actually an idiom that has its origins in a [Han dynasty](#) text called “[Fa Yan](#)” 《法言》 or “Exemplary Sayings” by [Yang Xiong](#) (揚雄). This text was deliberately modeled to resemble the [Analects](#) while posing ideas contrary to [Confucianism](#).

7] “Song ke” (送客) basically means to “send off the guest” and describes the etiquette that a host would follow in order to politely invite a guest to leave. In ancient China, this process could either be exquisitely formal or be just barely shy of unpardonable rudeness depending on the situation. A polite invitation for a guest to leave also relied on the guest being observant and considerate enough to realize the host’s request and then choosing not to overstay their welcome. Sometimes you will see a host drink their tea to send their guest away in historical Chinese settings because it was an unspoken cue or hint that the host wasn’t available to properly see to the guest’s hospitality so they should also be a good guest and leave.

[8\]](#) I've translated “bai jia zi” ([敗家子](#)) as “wastrel” and it literally means “defeat family son/child” in Chinese. This is a term that's typically applied to prodigal sons who were spoiled and thus had no money management skills and wasteful with their family's resources. Such sons were considered to be the reason for why their families would eventually suffer a downfall (and also for a Chinese saying stating that wealth couldn't be retained past the 3rd generation).

[9\]](#) Zhou Xihu (周西虎) has the surname of Zhou/周 with a name that means “west (xi/西) tiger (hu/虎).

[10\]](#) “Zhizi” (侄子) means nephew and can be used generically. However, if you wish to be specific about its meaning, it is the term that is used for the son of your brother. The term for your sister's son would actually be “wai sheng” (外甥). However, more often than not, Chinese people will just use zhizi/侄子 universally. I have noted “fraternal” in brackets next to it though because it is useful information since you can now immediately deduce that Zhou Xihu's uncle is his father's brother.

[11\]](#) I am translating zhou ([州](#)) as “prefecture.” However, this character can also be translated as “state” in modern day geography since California is “Jia zhou” (加州) and Texas is “De zhou” (德州) in Chinese.

[12\]](#) “Si Cang Can Jun” ([司倉參軍](#)) was an ancient position that had its origins in the Han dynasty and originally was the title for those who served an assistive role as quartermaster and military advisor. As with a lot of ancient Chinese official titles, over time because of

the change in bureaucracy, what you see may not be what you get so this position might or might not have anything to do with the military. However, for my sanity, I will be translating these titles as literally as possible.

[13\]](#) Zhou Kong (周控) has a given name that strangely has rather negative connotations as kong/[控](#) can mean “boorish or ignorant.”

[14\]](#) There wasn't any commonly agreed upon English translation that I could find for these official titles so I had to break it down based on a character by character basis to translate them. “Chang Si” (長司) basically works out to be “chief division/management.” Interestingly enough, the modern-day incarnation of this title is reversed and called “Si Chang” ([司長](#)).

[15\]](#) “Zhou Cishi” ([州刺史](#)) technically translates to “Prefectural Inspector” as they “inspected” the prefecture on the Emperor's behalf. This is another position that evolved ever since its origins with the Han dynasty government from serving as a form of Imperial Auditor (Cishi/[刺史](#) from the homophonous Cishi/[刺使](#)) to be more of a directly administrative government official. To reflect this and to avoid reader confusion as well as for clarification purposes, I translated this title as “Prefectural Governor,” which I will sometimes abbreviate to “Governor” since it seems to be the best term to use in order to show that this is a government official who oversees a prefecture, the ancient Chinese version of a federal state.

[16\]](#) “Zheng liu pin” (正六品) is an official grade within the [nine-rank system](#) or the “jiu pin zhong zheng zhi” ([九品中正制](#)) that was used to classify the officials within the different levels of the Tang

dynasty government. It was first implemented during the [Three Kingdoms period](#) with the 1st level being the top tier and the 9th level being the very bottom that could be further subdivided into zheng/正 or “proper/full” and cong/從 or “subordinate/deputy,” shang/上 or “upper” and xia/下 or “lower.”

[17\]](#) Cheng Lingxiang is referring to himself in the third person as “ben guan” (本官), which I have translated as “this official, I” since it is slightly proud in tone.

[18\]](#) Song Jing-gong actually says “fang wo yi ma” (放我一馬) or literally, “released a horse to me.” This is basically a colloquial idiom to describe going easy on someone or giving them a break.

[19\]](#) The Chinese considered the ensemble of the [qin](#)/琴 and [xiao](#)/簫 to be the best matching pair of musical instruments so a duet with them was considered the perfect melodic union. So Song Jing-gong’s original dialogue of “qin xiao he bi” (琴簫合璧) is a slight modification of the usual Chinese expression for this belief of “qin xiao he zou” ([琴簫合奏](#)), which means “duet of the qin and xiao.” I have noted the qin, a 7-stringed musical instrument that is plucked, as part of the [zither](#) family and the xiao as a type of flute. Because the Chinese had more than one instrument that fell under the zither or flute family of musical instruments with their own characters or names for each of them, I resorted to the pinyin rather than translating as a generic zither and flute in this case.

[20\]](#) “Wu chu qi you” ([無出其右](#)) basically means “none appears more right than they are.” This makes more sense when you know that ancient cultures including the Chinese considered the right-hand side the most distinguished. So for nobody else to be able to

claim the right-hand seat means that they are second to none.

[21\]](#) “Guo Nian” ([過年](#)) is the colloquial way to refer to the very first day of [Chinese New Year](#), which is formally known as the Spring Festival or “Chun Jie” ([春節](#)) in general, or the act of celebrating the new year. “Guo Nian” ([過年](#)) literally means to “pass (the) year.”

[22\]](#) “[Bing tang hulu](#)” ([冰糖葫蘆](#)) literally means “ice sugar bottle gourd.” This is a Chinese sweet that was made by dipping Chinese hawberries ([Crataegus pinnatifida](#)) into sugar syrup until it hardened into a candied coating before then being skewered by bamboo sticks. It was called “[bottle gourd](#)” or hulu/[葫蘆](#) because the stick of candied berries resembled the shape of a bottle gourd. You can see pictures of this treat on the Baidu page [here](#). To try to mitigate reader confusion, I translated the name as “candied gourd fruit.” If that isn’t a satisfactory choice for you, please let me know what you suggest as an alternative!

[23\]](#) I’ve translated “qing tang” ([清湯](#)) literally as “broth” or “light soup” though it could also be a Chinese dish that is wontons in a clear soup as stated by the Baidu page. However, I can’t definitely confirm from the context given whether the author means it is literally a clear broth or if he is referring to this dish.

[24\]](#) The [Yamen](#) ([衙門](#)) was the local administrative office and public residence of the area’s [mandarin](#) or government official. It acted as the centralized court house, main administrative seat, and central records for all of the bureaucratic needs required for governing. In addition, the ancient Chinese form of prototypical police officers were usually attached here as deputies to the

officials. In a way, the yamen was the worst place for commoners to have to visit because it was the ancient Chinese version of the police station, DMV, jail, and courthouse all rolled up into one! Because it is hard to fully communicate its central nature with just the generic “government offices” as its translated meaning, I will be resorting to the pinyin and noting its meaning in brackets next to it.

[25\]](#) A palanquin or sedan chair is a jiao/轎 in Chinese. It was a form of [litter](#) that was typically an enclosed box that was hoisted on the shoulders of the litter bearers. However, more luxurious forms could be the equivalent in size of a carriage with more prestige attached to the amount of bearers. They were invariably a sign of status and could be accompanied by a retinue of servants. You can visit the Chinese Wikipedia page for some pictures [here](#).

[26\]](#) “Hui yan ru ju” (慧眼如炬) is a bit of a pun here as it literally means “bright (smart) eyes like torch.” The wordplay is in the “hui yan” (慧眼) part since it can refer to an uncanny sight that can see the future and past or simply mean perceptive insight. But since hui/慧 is a character that means both “bright” and “intelligent,” using a simile for torches adds to the wordplay. So Song Jing-gong is wittily complimenting Cheng Lingxiang for being eagle-eyed and insightful enough to notice the adept’s hand in the subtle new changes Xiaobao is introducing.

Chapter 35: A Slap In The Face & A Sweet Jujube

Idler's Note: I translated the chapter's original title of "Yi Ge Ba Zhang Yi Tian Zao" (一個巴掌一甜棗) literally even though the meaning of it is essentially "A Carrot and A Stick" with the slap in the face standing in for the stick and the sweet jujube (Chinese red date or zao/棗) replacing the carrot in the Chinese version. Hopefully, readers will understand my translation choice.

Song Jing-gong basically didn't heed Zhou Xihu but first respectfully said to Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang: "Milord, you [honorific] please sit."

Waiting for Cheng Lingxiang to smile and nod as he sat, Song Jing-gong then looked at Zhou Xihu who was standing there with a face filled with arrogance: "Mister Zhou, please sit too. To have Milord Magistrate sit in accompaniment today, Zijin is much honored. Waiter, have your noble store's signature dishes served up."

At this time, Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang was inwardly enjoying this. Just now, Zhou Xihu's attitude as if he hadn't even actually seen him made him feel like his face had been overshadowed.¹ He secretly thought that this Zhou Xihu really was too ignorant.² What about your uncle [pater-junior]³ being 6th rank? If I really sentenced your case, would your uncle [pater-junior] still dare to overturn the verdict?

Song Jing-gong was not bad as he knew who the main focus was, being quick and easy when giving money. From now on, he'd

definitely need to take more care of him.

Zhou Xihu also discovered that he himself had been a bit too impetuous just now and had forgotten to give greeting. Uncle [pater-junior] had said not only once before to be respectful in front of this county magistrate. It was all this oil-selling Song Jing-gong's fault. If it weren't for him, how could he forget to first speak with the county magistrate?

Thinking of this, he looked at Song Jing-gong with more and more anger. After putting on appearances by pouring tea for the county magistrate, he then didn't even wait to ask Song Jing-gong again as he said: "Mister Song knows what I want, right?"

"Zhou Xihu, if you still speak thusly to me, I'll let you be unable to gain anything whatsoever." Song Jing-gong's face had darkened at this time.

"You, you dare directly speak my name and dare to speak like this to me? Don't forget—there's still a patient who's still down from eating your oil, ~ne."

Zhou Xihu stood up in one bound. In this Sanshui County, he had never seen anyone who'd dare speak like this to him.

Song Jing-gong smiled slight, sedately and leisurely taking out a sheet of paper from his person before casually throwing it out in front of Zhou Xihu. With one look, Zhou Xihu was dumbfounded. The words written on the paper, he didn't recognize any one of them. He hadn't learned them since childhood as he hadn't even

memorized the Thousand Character Classic.

“Uncle Cheng, you [honorific] help me read it.” Zhou Xihu had no recourse and could only hand this sheet of paper over into the hands of Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang.

Cheng Lingxiang took the paper and slowly read out loud: “I am that person who is specifically responsible for selling the oil. Because that person who pretended to be poisoned from eating the oil had a grudge against me, they therefore came over feigning illness to frame me. I knew that the situation wasn’t good and afraid of being retaliated against, could only leave Sanshui County to seek a living elsewhere.”

“See? Zhou Xihu, the employee I temporarily hired had a grudge with that person of yours who’s feigning illness and they’ve already been scared away now. You claim that your brother⁴ grew sick from eating the oil, then why did the family of that brother of yours not report it to the officials?” Song Jing-gong waited until the county magistrate was finished reading before he unhurriedly began to speak.

“Maybe it was that employee of yours with a grudge against my brother who intentionally poisoned it, ~ne.” Zhou Xihu didn’t think that Song Jing-gong would reverse the accusation back⁵ at him so he could only argue by picking and choosing the reasoning.

“Unh, that’s also possible. Then, have your brother report it to the officials and have the authorities issue an arrest warrant.⁶ That employee was hired by me at the last minute. I wasn’t clear

on his background details, either. That vegetable oil of mine's already been sold to half of the restaurants and inns in the entirety of Sanshui County as well as to the mansions⁷ of various noble personages.

Zhou Xihu, you can continue finding people to fake being sick. I'll withdraw all of the oil tonight. If those hotels ask about it, I'll definitely tell them the truth—that Sanshui County's Zhou Xihu can't be provoked so I'm selling the oil to other prefectures. I don't know if that uncle [pater-junior] of yours who's helping our prefecture's governor can still control me then?”

Song Jing-gong didn't even spare a glance at Zhou Xihu, gazing at the autumn scenery outside the window while making veiled threats.

Zhou Xihu was really afraid. Not only was he afraid, Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang was also afraid. When he thought of so many of Sanshui County's hotels uniting to exert pressure added on top of those noble personages who'd grown accustomed to using vegetable oil, if they really did begin to question him, it would be quite troublesome.

Meanwhile, Zhou Xihu discovered that he himself couldn't put forth any pressure. He couldn't possibly complain to the officials to issue whatever arrest warrant. Even if it were issued, it'd be no use, ~ah. Song Jing-gong had gotten himself out of it since at most, he'd be guilty of being a bad judge of character. If he really did sell the oil elsewhere, how much less taxes would this county receive?

“How about it, Zhou Xihu, have you thought it through?” Song

Jing-gong followed up with a question.

Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang felt that the person behind Song Jing-gong was indeed formidable. With such an action, Song Jing-gong now had no problems whatsoever. As for himself, he'd accepted that money so whatever else, he also had to help with the exoneration. Staring at the state of the ink marks on this paper, it had been written well in advance. They really had predicted the events beforehand.

But right now wasn't the time to speak of this as he still had to be the peacemaker⁸ so he had to talk of something else.

"Xihu, ~ah, it's not Uncle [pater-senior] criticizing you but you didn't even clear up whether it really was poison here, ~ne, and came over to look for trouble with Zijin. This really isn't good. If it were anyone else, they might have already filed suit against you at the Yamen [Govt. Offices]. By then, as an uncle [pater-senior] here, I wouldn't be able to so easily say anything, either. Hurry up and talk it over with Zijin."

Zhou Xihu was just now worrying about the consequences of this matter being found out by his uncle [pater-junior] there, ~ne, so seeing that the county magistrate was purposefully helping out, he didn't dare make any more trouble. He feared those people who'd already retired⁹ to this county finding issue with him after not being able to use the vegetable oil. If it weren't for the vegetable oil being so good, why would he come up with this sort of plan anyway?

At this time, the only thing that could be done was to not let Song Jing-gong sell the oil elsewhere so forcing a smile, he said: “[Older] Brother Zijin, I’m really sorry. It’s all Brother’s fault for being deceived by others at one point. I had thought, ~ah, with so many people simultaneously eating the oil, why was it that just one person got sick? With Zijin’s words, I only just now understood. So I ask for [Older] Brother Zijin’s forgiveness.”

“Well said, well said. From this matter, it can be understood that [Older] Brother Zhou¹⁰ is also a man who speaks of righteousness.¹¹ The matters of the past will be overlooked from this point on. I’ve observed that [Older] Brother Zhou has an impressive demeanor and is certainly not of the common ilk. This Song has a recipe on hand that can cause edible sugar to change color. If [Older] Brother Zhou has a wish to, this Song is willing to [Older] Brother Zhou jointly go into business.”

Song Jing-gong, seeing that the other side had admitted defeat, according to Little Mister’s instructions, it should now be the time for promising rewards. So while he spoke, he took out an oil-paper parcel from within his sleeve and gently opened it to place on top of the table.

“This is... sugar?” Zhou Xihu looked at the white stuff in the middle of the paper and exchanged an uncertain look with the county magistrate as he asked. Then, reaching out a finger to dab a bit to place inside his mouth, he rapidly blinked: “It’s sweet! It really is sugar. How was it made to look like this?”

“[Older] Brother Zhou speaks correctly. This is sugar. This type of sugar and that type we originally ate each have their

strengths.¹² If considering flavor, it is this sugar that's a bit better. If it's for medicine, then that original kind will be required. Wonder if [Older] Brother Zhou is willing to do this business?"

Song Jing-gong asked, his face covered with a smile.

"Willing, of course I'm willing—this business is good, ~ah! That recipe, I'd previously had done some... After that matter or whatever—[Older] Brother Zijin is still willing to do business with me?"

Of course, Zhou Xihu understood how much profit could be had from selling this stuff. He was just about to consent when he'd recalled how he'd previously wanted to extort them. At this time, would they still do business with them? So in his heart, there was such regret, ~ah.

"For [Older] Brother Zhou to speak like so is wrong. That matter [Older] Brother Zhou didn't know of either and we were all deceived. I saw that [Older] Brother Zhou had such a sense of justice and would certainly be able to do great things from now on. It'd be too late if I wanted to curry favor by then so why reject [Older] Brother Zhou's heartfelt intentions?" Song Jing-gong spoke according to Little Mister's instructions.

Zhou Xihu was in the midst of his excitement while Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang looked and listened on to the side as the sweat dripped downward. This was that person's hand, ~ah. In the beginning, that pressure was only a portion of it as there was hitting and pulling¹³ so that they could directly gain the notice of a

6th ranked official. Even he, this 7th ranked county magistrate, had been utilized. Such fine calculation.

The most terrifying wasn't this though but that person had already known that it would be like this. Could it be that when selling the vegetable oil, they'd already thought of this step? Otherwise, why not open a store? Song Jing-gong was managing two stores over here, ~ne. They gave 100 silver taels just like that so did they lack those several dozen taels of money to buy a store with? The smaller a booth was, the more easily it'd be bullied by people.

What Cheng Lingxiang most wished for was to meet that person behind Song Jing-gong. He finally witnessed with his own eyes what devising strategies inside the command tent to decide victory from 1,000 li [mile] outside was. Moreover, so many things had all been come up with by that person. That must certainly be a reclusive¹⁴ elder who would sit under a tree when idle to sip at the tea in their hand as their eyes gazed far into the distance; still like a mountain, moving like a thunderclap.

Song Jing-gong was also thinking of the words Little Mister had spoken. When the final object was revealed, that one surnamed Zhou would have a foolish appearance while the county magistrate would be disturbed in mind—it had actually all been predicted by Little Mister.

Zhou Xihu indeed had no heart or spleen¹⁵ and basically didn't over-think it that much. With thoughts of using this sugar to make a fortune for himself in the future and getting his parents' praise, especially in getting the acknowledgement of his uncle [pater-

junior], he felt like his body was filled with vigor as he grabbed a bit of sugar to stuff into his mouth.

“Zijin, you talk—how should the money made be split?”

“However [Older] Brother Zhou wishes to allocate it, it should be allocated. Even if [Older] Brother Zhou wishes to monopolize it all, I will still hand the recipe over to [Older] Brother Zhou.” Zhou Xihu asked in haste so Song Jing-gong also replied with nimbleness.

Zhou Xihu deeply inhaled two breaths and was about to speak when Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang suddenly interrupted: “Xihu, why don’t you thank Zijin? The money gained from this sugar in the future will definitely be a lot—why not divide it 50-50? If you can’t decide, then go ask your uncle [pater-junior].”

Cheng Lingxiang knew Zhou Xihu, this child. He really dared to take their recipe for free and get all of the money for himself. But if he really did that, then the results could be imagined. The person behind Song Jing-gong would be disappointed and would then discard this route. Besides, there was also him as the county magistrate here so they might even discard him as well.

Yes, discard. Don’t look at him being a county magistrate—he still feared being discarded by this kind of person. With that person present, he could go begging if he had an issue. But if you were discarded, who would you go begging to?

Song Jing-gong laughed. He felt like the greatest strategic

decision he'd made in this lifetime was to cross that bridge, even if he'd regretted crossing that bridge before. He really didn't know what words to use to label Little Mister. Little Mister had said before that even if the one surnamed Zhou didn't know the limits,¹⁶ the county magistrate would also speak up to help out. To follow this type of calculating person, what else could he ask for in this life?

“Why is Zijin laughing?” Cheng Lingxiang was puzzled.

“My house's Little... That person said that Milord would definitely handle it like so.” At this moment, Song Jing-gong seemed to have entirely changed in a transformation from the inside and out; with a reserved attitude and erect posture, that kind of loftiness had already penetrated from the exterior appearance into the bones within.

Zhou Xihu simply had no room to ponder what the two of them were talking about as all he could think of was his future outlook after getting rich. So to Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang, he said: “Uncle [pater-senior] speaks rightly. I'll return here and write a letter to Uncle [pater-junior].”

After speaking, he then turned his head: “[Older] Brother Zijin, I'll go back first today. Tomorrow, I'll invite [Older] Brother Zijin to the Hundred-Flavored Pavilion next door to drink wine.”

After Zhou Xihu had left and the food had also been served, Song Jing-gong picked up the chopsticks: “Milord, since the food has arrived, then let's eat. If it can't be eaten, I'll box it up to take away. That person at the manor hates those who order a bunch of

food without eating it the most.”

Notes:

[1\]](#) “Lian shang wu guang” (臉上無光) literally means “on face, no light.” This makes more sense if you consider that brightness of the face is a euphemism for a brightening of the facial expression in a positive way such as when pride is felt, which goes hand in hand with how the concept of “[face](#)” or lian/臉 and mian/面 is a metaphor for pride, honor, dignity, and status in Asian culture. This principle of face motivated a lot of behavior in Chinese culture where appearances had to be maintained, sometimes to the detriment of practicality or reality.

[2\]](#) I’ve translated “bu tong shi li” (不通事理), which roughly translates to “unknowing (of) common sense” as “ignorant.” Basically, Cheng Lingxiang is critical of Zhou Xihu for not knowing how to avoid giving offense while enjoying the benefits of the protection of his uncle’s status.

[3\]](#) I’ve footnoted shu/叔 before but I am doing so again because it is being used as a way to address a blood relation this time. So I will be noting that it is the father’s younger brother in text as a bracketed aside [pater-junior]. Bo/伯 will be noted as the father’s older brother as [pater-senior]. If used with non-blood relatives, then the person being so addressed is of the same generation as the speaker’s father but a bit younger or older.

[4\]](#) I’d previously footnoted this but since there’s so many familial addresses in this chapter, I will do so again here. Xiongdi/兄弟

basically means “fraternal siblings” or “brothers” in a general sense. So you will only see it used for non-blood relations like close male friends. It can also be used casually like “man” or “dude” or “buddy” can sometimes be in English. So think of my translation word choice of brothers like in a fraternity or a brotherly friendship. Since there is no age seniority implied in this term, it’s also generally used between male peers as well. You will be able to tell that this is a generic term of brotherhood because there won’t be any extra notes on it being older or younger.

5] I had to replace the Chinese idiom with a roughly equivalent English expression as a literal translation would be rather confusing. “Dao da yi ba” (倒打一耙) literally means to “reverse hit a rake” and has its origins in the [Ming dynasty](#) classic novel, [Journey to the West](#) 《西遊記》 by [Wu Chengen](#) (吳承恩). The ba/耙 mentioned in this idiom is short for the “nine-toothed rake” or “jiu chi dingba” (九齒釘耙) that was the personal weapon of [Zhu Bajie](#) (豬八戒) or “Pig Eight Abstains.” This expression refers to an incident in the novel where Zhu Bajie won a fight by reverse striking with his rake. However, the idiom itself tends to be used in cases for when someone is in the wrong but turns the accusation around at the other party rather than admit loss or examine their own sins. For a picture of the type of rake (or [harrow](#) as it is sometimes translated as) in general, you can visit the Baidu page [here](#) or [here](#).

6] I’ve translated “hai bu wen shu” (海捕文書) as “arrest warrant” even though its literal translation is “ocean capture document.” It is basically the equivalent of an ubiquitous wanted poster or an ancient Chinese incarnation of an [APB or all-points bulletin](#) that the authorities could issue for suspects wanted for questioning in a case.

7] Fu/府 can mean “official residence” when attached to public buildings but for private estates, it essentially translates to “mansion.” This is different in image from the “manor” I use to translate for zhuangzi/莊子 which basically refers to the Chinese version of a country estate since fu/府 has an extra connotation of luxury and prestige in Chinese so not just anyone could have a fu/府 in ancient China.

8] “He shi lao” (和事老) literally means “peace issue elder” so it’s a Chinese idiom for a peacemaker.

9] “Zhi shi” (致仕) basically means to “resign or retire.” However, this term has an implication of a government official retiring after a full career or with honor, which would be different from being dismissed or forced out. Naturally, such retirees would be a lot more powerful and influential than most people of their age.

10] Song Jing-gong is calling Zhou Xihu “Zhou xiong” (周兄) or “Older Brother Zhou” not because of age seniority as it’s debatable whether Zhou Xihu is actually older in age than Song Jing-gong but because this is a way of complimenting Zhou Xihu since calling him older is verbally granting him respect and acknowledging him as higher in the social hierarchy so it is a subtle way of sucking up. However, since Song Jing-gong isn’t using humble speech and freely uses “I” or wo/我 with him, it’s a matter of trying to simultaneously build intimacy with some relatively meaningless verbal praises while forcing Zhou Xihu to respect him by showing in action and speech that they are equals.

11] I’ve translated “yi qi” (義氣) as “righteousness” but I wished to footnote this because the concept is also entwined with the idea of

fraternity or a code of loyalty in Chinese culture, which makes sense when you consider that yi/義 appears in the Chinese phrase meaning “sworn brothers” or “jie yi xiong di” (結義兄弟) with the most famous example of which being the three sworn brothers of the [Romance of the Three Kingdoms](#) (三國演義) who went on to found the state of [Shu Han](#) (蜀漢): [Liu Bei](#) (劉備), [Guan Yu](#) (關羽), and [Zhang Fei](#) (張飛).

[12\]](#) “Ge you qian qiu” (各有千秋) translates to “each have 1,000 autumns.” Since the literal translation would be confusing, I chose to translate for the meaning. The story behind this idiom is related to the background of [Peng Zu](#) (彭祖) or “Ancestor Peng,” a legendary figure who supposedly lived for 800 years during the [Shang dynasty](#) (商朝) and is known as a [Taoist](#) saint. Legend goes that Peng Zu was one of the second generation grandsons of the mythical [Emperor Zhuangxi](#) (顓頊). Peng Zu’s father was Lu Zhong (陸終), considered to be [one of the 3 possible progenitors of Lu/陸 as a surname in China](#), who had married a woman of the [Guifang](#) clan (鬼方氏) named Nugui (女嬃) who subsequently fell pregnant for 3 years and then gave birth to 6 sons with Peng Zu being one of them. Since 3 years could be referred to as 1,000 autumns back then, this saying was to illustrate how these sons who had born after a three year long pregnancy each had their strengths or good points. [[Baidu](#)]

[13\]](#) I translated “you da you la” (有打有拉) literally because this is an euphemism to the usage of the “[carrot and stick](#)” strategy or “slap in the face and sweet jujube” as the Chinese put it. So the hitting part would be referring to the stick or the veiled threat that Song Jing-gong delivered while the pulling would be the lure as represented by the carrot or jujube such as with Song Jing-gong using the future profit of the sugar deal.

[14\]](#) I've translated “yin shi” (隱世) as “reclusive,” which is what it means but I wished to add that it literally means “hide from the world” and has connotations in Chinese of someone who has willingly secluded themselves from the outside world to seek enlightenment or finding it meaningless because they've already seen through the illusions of the mundane world, etc. So this is more in line with becoming a hermit for the sake of religion or philosophy rather than just eccentricity.

[15\]](#) I translated “mei xin mei pi” (沒心沒脾) literally. It isn't a common Chinese expression or idiom but rather an amalgamation of beliefs. Heart or xin/心 tends to be how Chinese expresses inward thoughts or refer to the mind so someone with no heart could either be heartless or brainless. In this case, it is the meaning of brainlessness that is intended. Pi/脾 can mean spleen or pancreas in Chinese but “temper” basically breaks down to “spleen's qi” or “pi qi” (脾氣), which can also have connotations of having a character or disposition so not having a spleen would mean not having character—basically, someone who has no principles. So pretty much, Zhou Xihu is being described as someone who's brainless and spineless if you are looking for a similar analogy in English.

[16\]](#) “Shen qian” (深淺) actually breaks down to mean “deep, shallow” or “depth.” It can tend to be used as an euphemism for limits so someone who doesn't know depth is someone who doesn't know moderation or the severity and implications of their behavior and actions.

Chapter 36: Lighting The Lamp & Recruiting People For Comfort

It was night. The drizzling rain was misty as the charcoal stove in the room spouted fire sparks. Shiliu and Mrs. Zhang-Wang's maid servant who slept next door each took shifts in the evening watch as they sat and lightly napped in a rocking chair¹ by the doorway that Wang Juan had people make.

"Xiaobao, you asleep? The charcoal is burning—it's inside the room." Wang Juan used her finger to poke Zhang Xiaobao.

"If I were asleep, I'd still be woken up by you. I was always afraid of being caught so my sleep was also never sound. Don't fear. The door's open, ~ne. The possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning is very low. Sleep." Zhang Xiaobao slightly turned his head, sweeping an eye over the door as he replied.

"But I'm still cold and there's no air conditioning, no central heating, and no underfloor heating.² I feel like it's difficult to breathe." Wang Juan said.

"That's normal. I'm the same, too. A child's body is sensitive. Typically during this time, children as big as us would cry as only security could be felt by being carried in an adult's arms. With the loss of body heat, it leads to the blood circulation slowing down and an insufficient blood supply to the brain, stimulating the heart as the pressure increases too much.

You would also have this type of thing happen during your trainings before. It's only that an adult's body is stronger than a child's. I was the same way when I had previously been training myself in the mountains as there were times that I wanted to cry. Tomorrow, let's have them come over to set up the kang [bed-stove]. By then, it'll be fine."

Zhang Xiaobao had learned quite a few things before so of course, he knew what the current state was. Most importantly was that he and Wang Juan couldn't possibly cry. Understanding was understanding—he was also not comfortable and had even used self-induced mental suggestion³ in order to sleep before he had been woken up by Wang Juan.

"I don't care. I don't want to use mental suggestions. My body will still be uncomfortable even after going to sleep. You hurry up and think of a way. Right now, I feel empty and helpless. The mental pressure is too much. Even if I can endure it, it's still detrimental to the body's growth."

Wang Juan had naturally gone through this type of thing before. But what she needed for her body right now was physical relaxation and not mental fortification.

Zhang Xiaobao thought on it and felt it was like that. He and Wang Juan possessed tough minds but had no way of guaranteeing normal rest for the body. It was still a bit too early for this kind of physical exhaustion training.

"Actually, it's very simple. Just sleep by your mother's side. That way, you would feel warmth and peace of mind. It has no

connection to the nervous reflexes. It's that your body's muscular control system can form a kind of resonance with your mother's body. The most obvious manifestation is through the pulse. I don't know if my Mom will have any effect on you.

At least, I have no problems. As long as I fall asleep, my Mom's heart rate and metabolism will unconsciously sync up with my heartbeat and metabolism. This isn't saying that the heartbeats will be the same but is a kind of natural calibration of the frequencies.

During this process, even if a child suddenly feels frightened, they would still proactively seek out their mother's embrace. And when a mother encounters danger during their dreams, they will still continue maintaining a protective posture over their child.

To give one of the simplest examples, when you really want to pee in your sleep, you'll discover that all of the toilets that appear in your dreams are all either especially dirty or clogged up. Or perhaps you're unexpectedly interrupted just as you were thinking of using the toilet until you've woken up from the urge to pee.

When a mother hugs a child while sleeping, the same sort of involuntary awareness will be formed. How about you go lie down by my Mom's side for a while? It might have some effect."

Zhang Xiaobao talked a bunch and finally suggested letting Wang Juan go to another room.

But Wang Juan shook her head: "I finally understand why was it

that some mothers who'd given birth to children but would still look so young while some aged faster. The young ones generally didn't raise the children by their side and had others take care of them.

The ones who aged faster typically kept the children by their side. They were always consciously cherishing and involuntarily within their subconscious protecting their child. Their bodies and minds were constantly strained at the same time under a prolonged effort. I'm not going. You think of a way quickly. You're an International Criminal Swindler—don't weaken your name."

"A person such as you is too unreasonable. I currently have no way of telling if you're being complimentary or derogatory. Fine, I'll talk. Don't kick me. Even if you put me down, you still can't get to sleep. Move the couch against the wall—against the wall of that room my Mom sleeps in. There are two doors here. You stick close to the wall. I'll be fine at your side here."

Zhang Xiaobao felt that the rate his brains cells were dying at this time was faster than when he was swindling. At least when he was swindling, he didn't need to get kicked.

Wang Juan accepted Zhang Xiaobao's suggestion and woke up Shiliu to have her help push the couch to the specified location. When she lay down again, Wang Juan laughed.

"Impressive, ~ya! Comrade Zhang Xiaobao, no wonder you could swindle so many people. Not speaking of anything else, in your grasp of human nature, you really are not at the normal level. Talk—how many ignorant young girls have you deceived in the past?

Pushed them in the corner.”⁴

“You feel like you can sleep well here, right? There’s a wall on that side. Outside the wall, there are people. This side has me. Calmed down, right? Destroying the bridge after crossing the river,⁵ killing the donkey after the milling,⁶ cooking the dog after the rabbits’ death,⁷ hiding the bow after the birds are gone⁸ isn’t right, ~di.⁹ What young girls did I deceive? I was working hard to make money. You only think of yourself. Look at Shiliu. Don’t you feel pity?”

Zhang Xiaobao regretted it. What was this called, ~ah? A woman’s reason had its own reason with no relation to age.

Wang Juan didn’t continue pestering him and looking at Shiliu who was sitting in the chair, she really did feel uneasy—even if Shiliu had three proper meals and one midnight snack.

“I’ve decided. Let’s find some more people from the manor for three shifts per day and every person at 8 hours each. The money will come from the treasury that we both share. Exploitation isn’t the goal; to be able to produce more benefits is fundamental.”

Wang Juan said she’d do it and did. The second day’s morning, she had people find several clever maids in the manor to come over. They could be assured of the loyalty of these people. The daytime still had Shiliu looking after the children. At night, Shiliu laid down to sleep while outside, two maids were positioned inside the room.

These two people could quietly talk there and even light an oil lamp that wouldn't be quenched for the entire night. It was fine as long as they stepped softly when walking a circuit inside the room every hour.

Other places in the courtyard house also had several additional people to keep evening vigil with the same treatment. It was just that some places had men and they could drink all of the tea that they wanted to along with little snacks¹⁰ in order to let the manor have enough life¹¹ at night.

After Mrs. Zhang-Wang learned of this arrangement by her own daughter-in-law, she didn't understand why she would want to do this as there'd be an additional expense. But since they had used their own money to pay for it, Mrs. Zhang-Wang was also not willing to be overly controlling and so let the little guys mess around.

The result was that waking up in the morning of the day after sleeping, the people of the manor all discovered that they slept especially well last night as each and every one of them clearly had a lot more vigor than in the past. This caused Mrs. Zhang-Wang to become astonished as she called over the steward to inquire after the cause.

The people inside the courtyard house didn't sleep like she and the others with someone specifically waiting on them at the sidelines. Sometimes, they'd have to worry about problems cropping up during the night so normally, they didn't sleep soundly. Before sleeping yesterday night, the servants learned of

the new arrangements. Understanding that there would always be people around nearby and that they'd be woken up if something did happen, they no longer had any worries in their heart.

“Mistress, Little Mister and Little Miss are indeed extraordinary people. That 6 year old little daughter of mine who would have nightmares every day before actually didn't get frightened awake yesterday night. Getting up today, she even said to me that she wasn't afraid as she knew that there would always be people protecting her.”

Steward Zhang didn't think that such a simple arrangement by Juan-Juan could actually have such a great advantage as he started singing praises to the side.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang was all smiles: “Unh, Steward should go busy yourself. I'll call Master to go see the children.”

“Xiaobao, think quickly. How to make it, ~ne?” Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao were sitting together once the both of them had gotten up in the morning. Placed on top of the paper in front of them was a bit of white sugar. The two of them were preparing to come out with a new product type but couldn't think of a method so could only futilely glare there.

“What I think is that water should be added. Boil it, ~ah, boil it until the sugar doesn't melt. When it's dried, it can be turned into blocks.”

Zhang Xiaobao's brow had wrinkled up but he still hadn't thought of a good method. Even the words he spoke out loud

himself, he wasn't certain about.

Wang Juan was just about to speak but instead raised her head together at the same time with Zhang Xiaobao to see Mrs. Zhang-Wang and Father Zhang approaching them together. Both of their awareness levels were rather high.

Seeing people had arrived, they'd hurriedly stood up in greeting—that thoughtful and well-behaved demeanor made people like them the more they looked at them.

“My son, what is this being made? Rock sugar?”¹² Father Zhang came over by that white sugar and asked while smiling.

“Ah~? Dad, there's rock sugar? Then, wouldn't there be white sugar, too? It's over, that sugar of mine won't make money.” Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were both simultaneously shocked. The two of them hadn't gotten to eat any rock sugar so had assumed that there weren't any, ~ne.

Father Zhang seemed to know what his son and this future daughter-in-law were thinking so he smiled while nodding and then shaking his head.

“My son has no need to worry. This white sugar and rock sugar is difficult to produce; the price is also high. Moreover, it doesn't compare to the fineness that this sugar of my son's has. The sugarcane required to produce 1 catty of white sugar can produce several times the amount of brown sugar. This sugar of yours only needs to be directly placed within the pot; after it's thickened, cool

it directly into blocks.”

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan emphatically nodded their heads. It looked like bookworms were rather impressive at times. Such a simple method, why didn’t they think of it, ~ne?

Mrs. Zhang-Wang and Father Zhang left after staying with the children for an hour. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were also no longer in the mood to make the sugar and prepared to hand it over to that one surnamed Zhou to figure out as their training started up once again.

It was another instance of autumn rain that fell as the weather was a bit cooler than the previous days.

Within the Great Hall of Zhang Manor.

“Master¹³ spake:¹⁴ ‘If riches were sought after, even if as a whip hand,¹⁵ then I [archaic]¹⁶ shall do so. If unable to seek them, then I [archaic] shall follow my preferences...’¹⁷ ‘Master used elegant speech:¹⁸ Poetry, Books, and the practice of Etiquette—on all these, he used elegant speech.’”¹⁹

“My son, stop first.” When Zhang Xiaobao was reciting the things he’d memorized over these past few days, Father Zhang suddenly told him to halt.

“Does my son remember what your father²⁰ has taught of the meaning of ‘Master used elegant speech: Poetry, Books, and the

practice of Etiquette—on all these, he used elegant speech?” Father Zhang here wasn’t satisfied with his son only knowing how to recite it.

“I know. Elegant speech was the official speech²¹ of the Zhou dynasty.²² Master Confucius normally used Lu dialect²³ but used the speech of Zhou officials when reading poetry, reciting books, and in etiquette.” Zhang Xiaobao had been studying extremely hard these past few days.

“And why Poetry, Books, and Etiquette?”²⁴ Father Zhang had actually directly jumped from one question to another question, already at a different place than that of what had been discussed from the Analects.

“Poetry, Books, and Etiquette are contained in the Six Classics.²⁵ The Six Classics: the Classic of Poetry, the Book of Documents,²⁶ Ceremonial Etiquette,²⁷ the Classic of Music,²⁸ the Changes of Zhou,²⁹ the Spring and Autumn Annals.”³⁰ This time, Zhang Xiaobao didn’t wait for his father to ask and straight away listed the Six Classics.

Seated in this hall were the elders of the two families of Zhang and Wang and seeing that Xiaobao was able to answer once asked, they all nodded their heads in approval.

At this time, Father Wang also grew interested. He hadn’t read books in this way like Father Zhang had so he offhandedly asked Wang Juan: “Does Juan-Juan know why there are so many people

who study the Six Classics?”

At once, everyone froze, especially Father Zhang—he hadn’t even taught it yet, ~ne.

Wang Juan had no time to fault her father for his ignorance and blind questioning as she replied after a bit of consideration: “A wealthy family doesn’t need to buy good fields for there are a thousand zhong³¹ of millet within the books; establishing residence doesn’t need a frame to be raised for there is a golden house within the books... If men wish to pursue their lifelong ambitions, then diligently read the Six Classics in front of the window.”³²

Notes:

¹] The Chinese used here is “xiao yao yi” ([逍遙椅](#)), which literally translates to “free (unfettered) chair” and can refer to either a rocking chair or a lounge chair. Amusingly enough, this name has been coopted as the name for an electric chair that, as far as I can tell, is a literal loveseat that that confusingly looks like an overly complicated lounge chair but is really used as a sex toy. Oh, you can imagine my confusion until I realized what was going on. Don’t believe me? Go to the Baidu page [here](#). There are diagrams. Needless to say, I opted to translate this as rocking chair...

²] “Di re” (地熱) technically could be translated as “geothermal” since it is basically the character for earth or ground (di/地) combined with the one for heat (re/熱). However, it is actually likely an abbreviation for “di re di ban” ([地熱地板](#)), which is a form

of [underfloor heated](#) flooring used in modern Chinese housing and an expansion on the concept of the [hypocaust](#).

3] I translated “zi wo xinli anshi” (自我心理暗示) literally but I wished to note that this is actually known as [autosuggestion](#), a form of [self-hypnosis](#), in English.

4] Juan-Juan says “bi qian jiao” (逼牆角), which literally means “force (to the) wall corner.” So this immediately calls up a common “romantic” stereotype in Asia, popularized by Japanese dramas called the kabedon (壁ドン), which is rendered as “bi don” ([壁咚](#)) in Chinese. It entails the boy trapping or forcing the girl into the corner and using an arm to bar her escape with the “don” being the onomatopoeia for his hand hitting the wall. Considering that Juan-Juan is teasing Xiaobao here, I wouldn’t put it past her to be making this reference. You can see illustrations in Chinese of this stereotype on the Baidu page [here](#) (It’s a bit surreal to read for me because they are way too detailed about it as they start categorizing the possible types).

5] The Chinese expression is “guo he chai qiao” ([過河拆橋](#)), which shares a similarity in image and meaning to the English idiom of “burning your bridges” but not quite. The action of tearing down or removing the bridge after one’s crossed is basically used in situations describing someone who discards a person who previously helped them simply because they lived out their usefulness. So it’s a criticism of those who answer another’s kindness with spite.

6] “Xie mo sha lu” ([卸磨殺驢](#)) means “unhitch millstone, kill donkey.” It’s another Chinese idiom that describes a person being

ungrateful and punishing those who previously helped them. In this case, the image conjured up is to unhitch the millstone from the donkey that had been pulling it after the milling is finished in order to kill it because they are no longer needed.

7] I translated “tu si gou peng” ([兔死狗烹](#)) literally here, too. This is a saying that has its origins in the [Records of the Grand Historian](#) or “Shiji” 《史記》 by [Sima Qian](#) (司馬遷) in the chapter recounting the history of the House of [King Goujian of Yue](#) (越王句踐世家). To explain this phrase, a summary of Goujian’s life has to first be provided. Goujian was the king of the [state of Yue](#) (越) during the [Spring and Autumn period](#). War between Yue and [Wu](#) (吳) had broken out because of a failed marriage alliance involving a Yue princess. Yue was defeated by Wu, leaving Goujian captured and turned into a personal servant of Wu palace. However, the victorious [King Helü](#) (闔閭) had also been mortally wounded. Though Helü left deathbed instructions to his son [Fuchai](#) who had succeeded him to never forget about the Yue (i.e. keep your eyes on Goujian), Goujian still succeeded in making Fuchai think Yue had completely submitted to Wu’s authority by serving him for 3 years before Goujian was allowed to return back to Yue as a vassal king. Goujian was then able to rebuild his kingdom back up with the help of talented advisors like [Wen Zhong](#) (文種) and [Fan Li](#) (范蠡) and after 10 years of plotting and scheming, Goujian succeeded in avenging his previous defeat and years of humiliation by forcing Fuchai to suicide and engineering the total destruction of Wu. Because of this monumental achievement, Goujian is always the example that is cited whenever loyalists of previous overthrown dynasties try to take back their past glory. Anyway, the idiom has its origin with Fan Li’s abrupt disappearance from the banquet that feted Yue’s victory. Fan Li’s outer clothing were later found by the river so he was assumed to be dead by suicide. However, Wen Zhong later received a letter from Fan Li that advised Wen Zhong to leave Goujian’s service, revealing Fan Li had faked his death and

hidden himself away. One of the analogy Fan Li gives for their situation is that the wild rabbits had all been caught so now, the hunting dogs will all be killed in order to be cooked and eaten. Basically, Fan Li said Goujian was the type to kill them both due to their talents now that he had gained success in order to ensure that his power would never be undermined since Fan Li and Wen Zhong were two of the key architects who helped Goujian in his plan to weaken Wu's power before it was ultimately overthrown. Despite Fan Li's astute advice, Wen Zhong still chose to stay behind though he faked being deathly ill to semi-retire from court and show his submission to Goujian. However, Goujian still forced Wen Zhong to suicide. So this is an idiom that specifically refers to rulers who kill off meritorious vassals. The founding emperor of the [Han dynasty](#), [Liu Bang](#) (劉邦), has also been historically criticized with this expression because of his treatment of [Han Xin](#) (韓信) who was ultimately killed by Liu Bang's wife, the [Empress Lü Zhi](#) (呂雉).

[8\]](#) I also translated “niao jin gong cang” ([鳥盡弓藏](#)). It is from the same letter that “the dogs are cooked after the rabbits' deaths” is from, which Fan Li wrote to Wen Zhong. It evokes an image of putting the bow away in storage as all the birds had been hunted and were gone. So it has the same meaning since it is the other one of the two analogies that Fan Li uses to describe Goujian and his attitude to his two vassals, Fan Li and Wen Zhong.

[9\]](#) Di/滴 is a deliberate typo/mispronunciation of the Chinese possessive particle, de/的, which is rather ubiquitous in the Chinese language. For the sake of comparison, no/の in Japanese plays a similar role as de/的 does in Chinese. The deliberate mistake adds a comedic tone and shows the joking or playful tone Xiaobao is probably speaking in.

[10\]](#) “Dian xin” (點心) can be used in different situations in Chinese. They are basically like the Chinese version of [hors d’oeuvres](#) so they can be translated as “pastries, desserts, refreshments, snacks, etc.” Obviously, “dian xin” (點心) could be little pastries served to guests as snacks or refreshment like tea biscuits or be served as desserts after a meal or be treated as appetizers. They didn’t need to be pastries either but were generally made to be bite-sized or snack-sized dishes. [Dim sum](#) is a style of Chinese cuisine that mostly involves dining on these types of dishes whose English name is based off of the Cantonese pronunciation of this term.

[11\]](#) The Chinese used here of “sheng qi” (生氣) usually means “angry” but in this case, it actually is meant literally since it breaks down to “life” or sheng/生 and “breath, energy” or qi/氣. Anger as a word in Chinese is arrived at by if you think of it as giving birth to breath since people tend to speed up in breathing rate when angry.

[12\]](#) “Bing tang” (冰糖) literally means “ice sugar” in Chinese and refers to [rock candy](#). It can also be translated as “crystal sugar.”

[13\]](#) Zi/子 is a shorthand reference to [Confucius](#) who could be addressed as Kongzi/孔子 (since his surname was Kong/孔), which itself was an abbreviation of the title of “Kong Fuzi” (孔夫子) or “Teacher/Master Kong.” Thus, a tradition of appending zi/子 to the surnames of great teachers as a sign of respect for their mastery evolved and why you can get [Mencius](#) (Mengzi/孟子), [Zhuangzi](#) (莊子), [Xunzi](#) (荀子), and others.

[14\]](#) Yue/曰 is an archaic way of saying “said” in Chinese so ziyue/

子曰 is commonly translated as “Master said” and refers to [Confucius](#). It specifically comes up a lot in the [Analects](#) to the point that it might as well have been an ancient Chinese meme. I personally chose to translate yue/曰 as “spake” to try to retain the archaic tone.

[15\]](#) “Zhi bian zhi shi” (執鞭之士) works out to mean “gentleman holding the whip,” which I chose to translate as simply “whip hand” as it is brief and still somewhat retains the meaning.

[16\]](#) Wu/吾 is an archaic form of “I” in Chinese, which is why I make a note of it in an editorial aside since I couldn’t find or think of a way to convey this in English.

[17\]](#) The sentence Xiaobao is quoting comes from the [Analects](#) or “Lun Yu” (論語). The language is very dense and archaic so I tried my best here to try to convey the meaning while keeping it as brief as possible. If you wish to see the original Chinese sentence in full, it is: “[子曰富而可求也，雖執鞭之士，吾亦為之，如不可求，從吾所好。](#)” The Analects are written in [Old Chinese](#), explaining the excessive footnotes I have here.

[18\]](#) “Ya yan” (雅言) literally translates to “elegant speech” and refers to a [prestige dialect](#) that existed before Mandarin speech came into being. Technically, Mandarin was based on the speech spoken by court officials which was made necessary to ensure the government could keep running by allowing communication between officials who came from all regions of China and then evolved to become “putonghua” (普通話) or “common speech.” Needless to say, communication in ancient pre-[Qin](#) China could be really confusing, motivating the Qin dynasty’s drive to force the

adoption of universal standards, which included reform of the written Chinese character scripts into the [Small Seal Script](#) as well as the laws, roads, weights, etc. in order to standardize ancient China for the purposes of ruling it though [spoken standard Chinese](#) still had a ways to go before it could mature into its own.

[19\]](#) I also translated this myself due to how this sentence is broken down within the story. Again, it is very compact in structure and archaic in tone since it is in [Old Chinese](#) so I chose to try to preserve that ancient feeling. Here is the original Chinese: “子所雅言: 詩, 書, 執禮, 皆雅言也.”

[20\]](#) “Wei Fu” (為父) literally means “being father” and is one of those self-referential third person pronouns that a speaker uses to emphasize their relationship to the listener. In this case, I have translated this as “your father.” It is normally not as arrogant sounding as other possible third person pronouns that speakers can address themselves by as wei/為 is softer in tone than ben/本 because the relationship it is normally prefixed to is one dependent on the listener and not on the speaker. I will try to illustrate this with a side by side comparison example. Take “ben fu” (本夫) vs “wei fu” (為夫) for instance. Though there is only a difference of one character, their meanings and tone are wildly different in Chinese. “Ben fu” (本夫) basically translates to “this gentleman, I” because the fu/夫 in this case is referring to “Da Fu” (大夫), which used to be a court title of the Han dynasty before it became a possible euphemism for members of the [scholar class](#) in general. On the other hand, “wei fu” (為夫) means “your husband, I” because fu/夫 can also refer to “fu jun” (夫君) or “lord husband” but it is much more conciliatory in tone. So “wei fu” (為夫) just doesn’t have the same arrogant tone as “ben fu” (本夫) does because of the different relationship dynamic and how the speaker is relating to the listener. Hopefully, this explanation isn’t further confusing to

readers...

[21\]](#) “Guan yan” (官言) or “official speech” basically refers to the Chinese that court officials and bureaucrats spoke that was the ancestor of the dialect that became known as [Mandarin](#), so named in English because of the [mandarin officials](#).

[22\]](#) “Zhou Chao” (周朝) is the [Zhou dynasty](#), which is the dynasty that preceded the [Qin dynasty](#). It is one of the longest lasting dynasties in Chinese history and its origins are shrouded in myth and legend. It is significant for the form of feudalism ([fengjian](#)/封建) it practiced which backfired on the rulers of Zhou as their authority collapsed since they granted fiefdoms to vassals that later blocked Zhou’s expansion but gave free rein to the vassal states to continue expanding territorially. This gradual breakdown of the Chinese feudal system led to the kings of Zhou becoming mostly ceremonial figureheads as their “subordinate” states grew more and more powerful during the [Spring and Autumn period](#) before finally degenerating into the hegemonic free for all that was the [Warring States period](#).

[23\]](#) The original text uses “Lu di hua” (魯地話), which literally means “Lu regional talk” and refers to the regional dialect spoken by people of the [state of Lu](#).

[24\]](#) “Shi Shu Li” (詩書禮) is a reference to the first three [Chinese classic texts](#) that are part of the [Five Classics](#) (五經), so labelled because it served as an acronym of sorts with each character referring to one of the books that contained the respective character.

[25\]](#) “Liu Jing” (六經) translates to “Six Classics” which is the former incarnation of the [Five Classics](#) before one of the eponymous classics was lost.

[26\]](#) “Shang Shu” (尚書) means “esteemed book,” which is usually translated as either “[Book of Documents](#)” or “Classic of History,” was a collection of prose by pre-Zhou rulers and officials whose compilation was typically attributed to [Confucius](#). It can also be referred to as simply “Book” or Shu/書 and “Shu Jing” (書經), which roughly translates to “Classic of Books.”

[27\]](#) Xiaobao lists “Yi Li” (儀禮), which is usually translated as the “[Book of Etiquette and Ceremony](#)” though I have chosen to translate it as “Ceremonial Etiquette.” This book describes the ceremonies and rites that made up [Spring and Autumn period](#) etiquette. Other titles this text is known by are “Gentlemanly Rites” (Shili/士禮), “Classic of Rites” (Lijing/禮經), or simply “Rites” (Li/禮). Because of the [Qin dynasty](#)’s [Burning of the Books](#), this text has several editions with questionable veracity that are a source of contention. However, the [Five Classics](#) tends to lists the [Book of Rites](#) (Liji/禮記) in its place instead. This discrepancy reflects the time period since Xiaobao is currently in the [Tang dynasty](#), whose state-approved curriculum did not have to match up with the texts that were set for the Five Classics as the curriculum for later dynasties. So you can just assume that the Tang dynasty’s set curriculum for the [civil exams](#) are the Six Classics instead of the Five Classics as used in later dynasties.

[28\]](#) “Yue Jing” (樂經) translates to “Classic of Music” and is usually the sixth entry to the Five Classics except that it was lost by the time of the [Han dynasty](#) due to the failure to reproduce it in full due to its loss in the [Qin dynasty](#)’s [Burning of the Books](#).

[29\]](#) “Zhou Yi” (周易) means “Changes of [Zhou](#)” and is a divination text of [Western Zhou](#) that formed the core that the [I Ching](#) (易經) was later based on. You can tell the relationship between the two as both titles retain Yi/易 or “Changes” in their names. By the way, I Ching is actually an erroneous transcription since it should be transcribed as “Yi Jing,” which translates to “Classic of Changes.” However, because “I Ching” is how it was first known to the West, that is the most common name the text is known by.

[30\]](#) “Chun Qiu” (春秋) just means “spring (and) autumn,” which by itself can refer to the [time period](#) or the book title, which is translated as the [Spring and Autumn Annals](#). It officially chronicled the history of the [state of Lu](#) (魯). Spring and Autumn as a name for the time period and text was arrived at because the historians who wrote the Annals only noted down significant events by the season so “spring and autumn” became an abbreviated euphemism for referring to the whole year.

[31\]](#) Zhong/鍾 normally means “clock” in Chinese. However, in this case, zhong/鍾 refers to an antiquated traditional measurement unit for volume that was used by the state of [Qi](#) (齊) during the [Warring States period](#). It was initially set as 6 hu/斛 and 4 dou/斗 (~350 liters or 90 gallons) before being set to be around 8 to 10 hu/斛 (415-515 liters or ~110-135 gallons). 1 zhong/鍾 could also be divided into 10 fu/釜, another ancient unit of measure. Zhong/鍾 could also refer to ancient drinking vessels that were used as goblets.

[32\]](#) Juan-Juan is quoting the “Quan Xue Shi” 《[勸學詩](#)》, the title of which could be roughly translated as “Learning Encouragement Poem.” This was a poem composed by [Emperor Zhenzong](#) of [Song](#)

(宋真宗) in order to encourage men to take the [civil exams](#) to fulfill their dreams and ambitions. He issued this poem officially to the entire country to promote the government as a meritocracy. The most famous idiom to come out of the poem is likely the one that states that there is a “golden house within the books.” The full text in Chinese is here:

當家不用買良田，書中自有千鍾粟；
安居不用架高堂，書中自有黃金屋；
娶妻莫恨無良媒，書中自有顏如玉；
出門莫恨無人隨，書中車馬多如簇；
男兒欲遂平生志，五經勤向窗前讀。

Juan-Juan only quotes the first two lines along with the last line, which she modifies into referring to the Six Classics instead of the Five Classics that the poem originally mentions. Yes, this means she is kinda taking advantage of the fact that she is in the past before the Song dynasty has been established and plagiarizing one of its emperors...

Chapter 37: An Once Abandoned Plan Turned Into A Good Idea

Following Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan's answers, the members of the two families of Zhang and Wang valued these two children more and more. Especially after Wang Manor had also imitated Zhang Manor by hiring several more people and discovered that the money spent wasn't that much but the people underneath worked even harder than they had previously.

In the afternoon, the temperature went back up. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan brought along Shiliu as they walked towards those fields that had been completely harvested. At this time, the fields had patch after patch of short stubble; it was all like this, regardless of whether it was rice, wheat, and millet.

"Xiaobao, can some vegetables be planted during the winter?" Wang Juan picked up a leaf that had been blown by the wind onto her body and felt that for the land in front of her to be empty for the winter was a bit wasteful.

Zhang Xiaobao pursed his little mouth as he gazed at those fields. Only after a long while did he shake his head and say with resignation: "To want to plant these lands here isn't feasible. Wonder how much is 1 catty of cucumbers in the winter?"

"Shiliu, how much do cucumbers cost in the winter?" Wang Juan turned her head around to ask Shiliu who was following closely.

"Where are there cucumbers? After two more days, the

stockpiled cucumbers will need to be eaten up otherwise they'll go bad. If Little Miss wishes to eat cucumbers, the cucumbers can be dried in the shade.¹ Then, use water to soak them with to eat them—the other vegetables are prepared this way, too.” Shiliu didn't know what these two little guys were thinking? To even expect to buy cucumbers in the winter.

“Then if there are cucumbers—just picked—how much money would you be prepared to buy them for?” Zhang Xiaobao subsequently asked.

“In reply to Little Mister's words, I wouldn't buy them. Even if they could be bought, I wouldn't be able to afford them.” Shiliu also didn't have anything to do so she went along with conversing on these topics that were impossible to realize.

But Wang Juan didn't think so. If Zhang Xiaobao didn't have a way, he wouldn't be so fixated on this line of questioning. She thought on it for a while but discovered that a greenhouse² couldn't be built so she could only use her hand to bump Zhang Xiaobao: “How do you want to plant cucumbers?”

“Erniu has grown idle. Have him go to Ge Manor to collect firewood—that is, the stalks from rice, wheat, and millet. This stuff should be extremely cheap as 1 wen [cash] of money should be enough to buy several large bundles. Then, we'll plant the cucumbers. Today, we'll do the preparation work; tomorrow, we'll do it.”

Zhang Xiaobao started planning things out while to the side,

Wang Juan still had not figured out how the cucumbers could be planted.

Not waiting for her to ask, Zhang Xiaobao explained it for her: “In fact, this is a scam—one that a subordinate had originally thought up. I thought that it wouldn’t be easy to implement so I didn’t use it. This method can, in a situation without using any transparent materials, plant vegetables in the north during the winter.

Theoretically, it’s possible but the reality of the process is that it doesn’t compare to just shipping it over from other summer seasonal countries. The investment is large but the gain is small so the revenue wouldn’t make up for the deficits.³ Over on this side, some of the materials are cheap and you don’t even need to account for the time or labor; on top of that, winter has no cucumbers so it should be able to make money. Tomorrow, get busy along with me.”

Wang Juan, seeing that Zhang Xiaobao had spoken of it in passing but still hadn’t pointed out the matter, didn’t hurry to ask as she would know by looking at how he prepared today.

With business to be accomplished, the three of them didn’t linger much outside as they turned around to go back and Zhang Xiaobao started setting up the arrangements.

Picking out a plot of land that was 40 meters by 40 meters in the back, he and Wang Juan did the rough measurements together, digging out a square trench located every 5 meters by 5 meters with the trench being 1.5 meters deep.

Subsequently, a wall was built on top to surround that area of over 20 square meters. It was the kind that was hollow-shelled⁴ in the middle with a wall height of 2 meters. Near the top of the interior, holes that were as thick as a small child's arm were drilled in place at every 1 meter interval.

The manor was currently not busy and had a lot of people. The master-family took care of the meals so that they could even save up some of their own family's food grains. So they all came over to help. Once the holes on the wall had been completely bored out, another hole was drilled in each exterior surrounding wall that was slightly larger.

It was only when night came that these could all be considered to be finished though it had not dried yet. Erniu brought over firewood to start baking the walls during the night as a stove⁵ had been connected to the bottom hole and firewood placed within the stove so that the hot air could travel along the area in between the two walls to move to other places.

During this one night, there were a lot of people lighting the fire so it was rather lively. The little kids of the manor were all too excited to sleep as they wandered back and forth.

Morning, the next day. Zhang Xiaobao had people go and collect mats—those types that were the cheapest. They could be mats⁶ woven out of grass and could also be woven out of reeds. Bamboo wasn't considered as they were a bit costly. They did purchase countless bamboo poles that were as thick as a little child's arm

and at least 2.5 meters long, which was around 6 chi [foot].

Don't just see how the stuff wasn't worth any money. To buy everything had even cost Zhang Xiaobao 100 bolts of silk along with 20 silver taels, causing Steward Zhang who had been looking on from the side bad heart pains.

“For Little Mister who's been busy these past few days making money, it hasn't been so easy either. Mess around once and 20 taels were gone. The spicy sauce, vegetable oil, and borrowing on credit for the past two days had to be resorted to make up for it. And the money from Little Mister selling the carrots has even been used. Of the money of the two manors added on top of the money that Little Mister made, 3,900 taels of silver has all been exchanged for food grains. This even includes that portion originally from Mister Song.

The chicks have grown up quite a bit but selling them isn't allowed and they'll only be able to produce eggs next year. After paying the taxes in grains,⁷ the manor won't have any extra money⁸ to spare. Right now, all of the expenses of the manor are even being supported by the money from Little Mister's daily sale of the oil and sauce. Mistress, how about persuading Little Mister?”

Steward Zhang muttered for a while at Mrs. Zhang-Wang who was also watching the commotion. 20 silver taels, ~ah! It was enough for the courtyard house's overhead for a single month.

“Steward Zhang, Xiaobao wants to do this and he's even using his

own money so bystanders shouldn't mind. Xiaobao has his own plans."

Mrs. Zhang-Wang was rather indifferent. There were still hundreds and tens of guan [strings of cash] in the house and when she looked again at those food grains that had been piled up into hill after hill, she basically wasn't worried. Moreover, that vegetable oil would have daily revenue and even after subtracting the two manors' expenses, there was still a surplus left over.

When it was night, several people remained here to light the fire and keep watch as Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao also came over to see.

"Xiaobao, you're thinking of planting cucumbers in the middle here. If it's cold, just light up the fire a bit. During the daytime, open up the shed and connect the hollowed out bamboo so as to preserve the interior temperature. If two bamboo poles are joined together, their two ends would meet up just right. Then, cover it up with mats at night. Then, what about the moisture level for winter here, ~ne?"

Wang Juan understood. No wonder Zhang Xiaobao said that it was a scam. Wasn't that so? If placed in that time, this stuff would require a lot of money—it'd even more expensive than building a greenhouse. Cucumbers could be had elsewhere and basically couldn't be sold for too much money. How much money would be needed to ship it over from the south to the north?

"Maintaining the moisture's easy. Just spraying water on the mats covering it would be fine. The mats consumed will be a bit

more but it's good that they're inexpensive. The most important consideration for winter is the snow. If there really is heavy snow, then people will need to get up to brush it off at night. The land fears the chill so the trenches were dug out so that it could be baked with fire every few days.

Under this kind of sunlight, the cucumbers will grow slowly. It's the middle 10 days of the 9th lunar month⁹ right now, according to the calculations on this side. With another 2 and half months, it'll be the New Year, which is about when they'll come down. Then, we'll earn a big sum and have a good New Year's. The secrecy needs to be protected well when it's being artificially pollinated."

As the words slowly came out of Zhang Xiaobao's mouth, Wang Juan gazed at his calm expression on his face and felt that this was the style that International Criminal Swindler of before should have—just like a patriarch¹⁰ commanding their subordinates to knock down one after another one of their enemies with a steadfast and profound bearing that allowed their subordinates to forever be filled with confidence and hope.

"Didn't expect it, ah. Something that was originally meant to scam people with could actually make money on this side. By that time, eating a bite of cucumbers would be more expensive than eating a bite of meat. Let's go. Tomorrow morning, Mister Song will be returning to give us the money from selling the sugar in cooperation with that Zhou Xihu. The peasants from your and my two families' manors needs people to go renovate their houses as well as to set up the kang [bed-stove]. It's all counting on this sum of money, ne."

Wang Juan pulled on Zhang Xiaobao's hand as she turned around to walk towards the residential area, the two small little figures growing longer and longer under the firelight.

The morning of the second day, Song Jing-gong rushed back as he first took out the money from the oil that had been sold yesterday. It wasn't much, being only 900 or so copper coins and not even reaching 1 silvertael. However, carrying it wasn't light or easy. The main thing was that a lot of people had used other things in exchange.

According to Zhang Xiaobao's instructions, if these things could be preserved, they were aggregated before being sold off in bulk while the ones that couldn't be preserved were basically some edibles such as 3 catties of dewy spinach that were used to exchange for 1 catty of tofu. The spinach would be directly brought over to that small eatery that had been purchased. The accounts were recorded separately and then, would be settled at the end of the month.

"Little Mister, this is the money that Zhou Xihu gave. Based on what you [honorific] said, I initially asked for 30% of the money, lowering the 50% by two levels on my own. That Zhou Xihu was so badly delighted. This is 120 silver taels. Carrying them on my person along with those copper coins almost crushed me to death."

Song Jing-gong placed a bundle he'd been carrying on his back in front of Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan. He pulled open the knot to reveal inside the gray-white color of silver—12 ingots, each ingot weighing 10 taels.

Zhang Xiaobao nodded his head. Having this money would be enough.

Song Jing-gong saw that Little Mister didn't have any expression of surprise so he himself couldn't be so excited, either. So he asked as if wishing to play a guessing game with Little Mister: "Little Mister, why don't you [honorific] guess why over 100 silver taels were gained in such a short time?"

"This requires a guess? Zhou Xihu has been spoiled and pampered since birth and he hasn't even come of age yet, ~ne, so he's still considered a child. He's the same as me and wants to have the people in his family be happy. So in the end, he used quite a few tricks to transport over a large amount of brown sugar to make into white sugar and then sold them using the connections that he found.

I can guess that within the prefecture, any place that sells sugar will have his white sugar. What you've brought over will only be the first sum of money; the next sum of money will soon arrive. Yesterday night, I told Erniu to leave the prefecture today and go elsewhere to buy brown sugar. Before the New Year, it'll increase greatly in price—the money that needs to be made still has to be made."

Zhang Xiaobao used his hands to caress the silver, feeling the coolness of the surface while he talked.

"Little Mister, I'll go back first. Tomorrow, I'll return in the afternoon and bring over the second sum of money here."

After Song Jing-gong finished listening to Zhang Xiaobao's words, the last trace of excitement also disappeared from his face as he stood up, leaving behind a sentence before he listlessly and dispiritedly left. He suddenly felt like his constant swindling in the past had been meaningless. Facing Little Mister, he was like a small child who had just learned how to walk.

It was only when he asked these types of questions that he thought were rather difficult that Little Mister would always be that nonchalantly blasé,¹¹ always with a smile on that cute face that made him feel chills from the inside out the more that he looked at it.

"Xiaobao, you've scared him." Wang Juan knew as a matter of course what Song Jing-gong's mood was like. It was just like when she had first seen Zhang Xiaobao's data. When you were faced with this type of genius who you couldn't deny, there was a sense of powerlessness.

"I didn't scare him. I'm giving him confidence. He's a conceited person who thinks that he's smarter than other people. I'll keep him tightly in check and then, he'll think it through.

He himself is already that impressive and behind him, there's an even more impressive person—so what does he have to fear when he's doing something? He'll then utilize all of his abilities and not need to think of a path for retreat and will let him be self-confident. This is the position that he should be in."

Zhang Xiaobao provided Wang Juan a one-time analysis of the motivational theory behind human nature and talented personnel.

Notes:

1] “Yin gan” (蔭乾) basically means “to dry in the shade” and refers to a type of [food drying](#). This would be an ancient way of dehydrating food for the purposes of storage preservation where the food is placed in a cool and dry place for a period of time so that the water contents can naturally evaporate. The ancient Chinese did this for a variety of foods that included vegetables and fruits as well as medicines and herbs.

2] “Da peng” (大棚) literally means “big shed” but usually refers to a greenhouse or a building/covered awning under which plants and crops are grown.

3] I translated for the meaning of the Chinese expression used here of “ru bu fu chu” (入不敷出), which breaks down etymologically as “entry (intake) not sufficient for exit (expense)” and is generally translated as “unable to make ends meet.”

4] Technically, it is described as “jia ceng” (夾層) in the original text, which literally means “folded layer” and can either refer to a mezzanine-like middle layer or a double-decker setup or a structure whose layers are folded around a hollow center. Based on the description and to avoid reader confusion, I chose to word it as “hollow.”

5] The kind of stove that they are talking about here is slightly

different in structure and design than the ones most people have in mind as they share the same function as modern stovetops but had different designs. In Chinese, it is called a “zao tai” (灶台) and was a structure that was the combination of a hearth and stove. For a picture, go to the Baidu page [here](#).

6] “Xizi” (席子) just means “mat” in Chinese and described mats that were typically woven out of straw or reeds as ones that were woven out of cloth were usually described as rugs or blankets rather than mats in Chinese. For reference, the “xizi” (席子) would closely resemble Japanese [tatami mats](#) or [reed mats](#) from India and Thailand.

7] The original Chinese of “xiang shang mian jiao wan liang” (向上面交完糧) literally translates to “giving the food/grains upwards,” which would sound confusing to readers. To clarify, “upwards” is an euphemism for the government which rules over all of them. So in this case, Steward Zhang is speaking of paying taxes to the government using food grains in exchange rather than hard currency.

8] The term Steward Zhang uses here is “huo qian” (活錢), which works out to mean “live money” but it essentially means “spare cash.”

9] “Zhong xun” (中旬) refers to the time period within a month that is specifically the 11th to 20th day. “Jiu yue” (九月) means “9th month” and it is more than likely that Xiaobao is using the [traditional Chinese calendar](#) so the “9th month” would probably not be referring to September but the 9th lunar month.

[10\]](#) “Jia zhang” (家長) normally means “parents or child’s guardians” in Chinese and you will see it being used within the term that is the Chinese equivalent for a parent-teacher conference. However, it literally means “family elder/chief” and in this case, it is being used for its connotations as the head of the family (i.e. the patriarch or matriarch). Since Juan-Juan is using it as an analogy for Xiaobao, I have chosen to translate it as “patriarch” in this context.

[11\]](#) “Qing miao dan xie” (輕描淡寫) is actually a Chinese idiom describing the act of filling in the colors of a painting as it literally translates to “lightly draw, shallowly write.” It is generally used as an euphemism for delicate actions or subtle and understated emotions that are airy and composed. In order to try to convey the connotations of the usage here, I’ve translated this expression as “nonchalantly blasé.”

Chapter 38: Life Still Has Hope

When the first heavy snowfall descended upon the great earth, the surrounding scenery color had all changed. Whether it was the nakedly bald tree branches or those still lushly verdant pines and cypresses, they all stood there bearing strips or patches of white.

The ducks and geese didn't go to the pond in the morning anymore. Only when it was midday did they honk as they rushed towards the location with water. As they left behind a mess of chaotic footprints on the snowy ground, Xiaohong held a bamboo rod in her hand while following from behind, those guys in front seeming to all be her subordinates.

Yingtao was leading a manservant from the manor that was carrying the chicken feed as she made "gu-gu" sounds with her mouth in order to summon the chickens that were hiding in their nests. At once, over 1,900 hens along with 100 roosters flapped their wings as they ran out in succession.

Erniu inspected the brown sugar that had been piled up like grains of sand within the warehouses before turning around to lock the door in order to go help Shiliu take care of those earthworms. Lifting away the disordered mess of stuff that had been piled on top of the earthworms to check and not let these things start smoking, he then finished up by stacking the surrounding snow back on top again. He could now go find Little Mister.

Shiliu followed Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan to the back to check to see if there were 'houses' that had fallen over. The

cucumbers in that land there had already started growing creeping vines. To have even a single one die would make her heart hurt.

When they'd reached the location, the sight before their eyes was a swath of yellow-brown color with not a trace of the white-colored snow to be seen. The peasants didn't need anyone to inform them and had proactively come over to help clean up the accumulated snow. Building after building of little houses were all pristinely standing there and the snow that had fallen on top of the houses' curtains had also been cleaned off.

When those peasants saw that Little Mister and Little Miss Juan-Juan had arrived, they one after another came over to give greetings as each and every one of their faces bore a sincere yet respectful smile. This was unrelated to Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan's own identities.

"Uncle Wang, is your family's house leaking snow? Is it warm inside?" Wang Juan softly asked when one of the people asked after her.

"In reply to Little Miss' words, warm, really too warm! The house isn't leaking snow, either. It's sturdy, ~ne! This is all thanks to the manor paying to repair the house and build the kang [bed-stove]. Otherwise, I'll have to be affected this year again. This old man, I've never seen such a good master-family before."

Upon speaking of his family's matters, this Uncle Wang's eyes had squinted until he nearly couldn't see. As he spoke, he tried to pull his son by his side to kneel down and kowtow, which was naturally held back by Shiliu.

“Unh, that’s good, then. In less than a month, it’ll be New Year’s. How are the preparations for the New Year goods¹ in your family? For New Year this year, the manor will be giving every person 2 catties of pork, 1 catty of vegetable oil, and 6 chi [foot] of cloth to let the fellow villagers² have a good New Year’s.”

Zhang Xiaobao said with a smile; he liked this type of feeling of being a single family.

“Little Mister, we can’t accept this many things, ~ah! You [honorific], this is...” Uncle Wang didn’t know what he should say.

“I’m buying people’s hearts here. In the future, some things will appear on the manor that outsiders can’t be allowed to know about. So buying people’s hearts is to help me keep it secret.” Zhang Xiaobao blurted out the truth.

“Little Mister, don’t say people’s hearts, this old man’s life is all yours [honorific]! Whatever things Little Mister wants to do, this old man will help you protect it. Whoever wants to ruin it, this old man will stake my life against whoever.” Uncle Wang exclaimed as the other people around him also followed suite in echoing their agreement.

Everybody all knew in their hearts that the hearts of people were gained in exchange. You treat me well and I’ll treat you well. Other than the two manors of Zhang and Wang, they hadn’t ever seen any master-family buy people’s hearts like so—repairing houses, building the kang [bed-stove], not to mention giving money for

their work and to even have meat with every meal as well as warm wine to warm the body when it was cold. It was nearly New Year's and they were giving out things again. People's hearts were all made of flesh.

Zhang Xiaobao gave a Wang Juan look as the two of them could both feel warm tenderness. Wang Juan's lips twitched slightly and Zhang Xiaobao nodded before Wang Juan finally said:

“Fellow villagers, this year is still a bit lacking. Wait until next year, Yingtao over there will have even more chicks being hatched. By that time, whichever family wants to raise them can come over to fetch them. Once they lay eggs, the manor will collect them and let every family have more spare cash to use.”

Once these words were said, the peasants were all happy. Some even cheerfully yelled out twice to give vent to the joy in their hearts as this snow didn't seem to be that cold anymore.

Only a few little kids who had come over from Ge Manor to play didn't have any happy thoughts at all. They weren't people from the two manors of Zhang and Wang. Anything else, they weren't clear on but the items given for the New Year, they did know about. If one person would get 2 catties of meat, then wouldn't one family be able to receive quite a lot? If they wanted to wrap dumplings,³ they could wrap dumplings; if they wanted to pan-fry flat cakes, they could pan-fry flat cakes.

And that vegetable oil could fry a lot of things to eat. The cloth was also enough to make an outfit of new clothes. Comparing the two, the little kids all were a bit resentful of the adults in their

family—why didn't they go to the two manors of Zhang and Wang back then?

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, seeing that this side had no problems whatsoever, were also reassured. After speaking two sentences with words to motivate people, they left under escort of the crowd's respectful gazes.

"Why did you tell the truth, ~ne?" Wang Juan asked Zhang Xiaobao on the return path.

"I did want to speak of theory with them and I was even prepared to recite a portion from the Analects or Thousand Character Classic or whatever but would they be able to comprehend it? The things that the peasants need are extremely simple—be fully fed, be clothed warmly, to live safely, and to be able to show off some in front of the other peasants—these are the largest spiritual and material needs for a culture."

"Yes, ~ya! They're all good folks, ~ah! Treat them a bit well and they'll remember it for a lifetime. I've decided, when it's a bit warmer, to build a school and let the little kids of our two manors be able to learn to read." Wang Juan started getting emotional over there.

"Not only from our two manors—also have to attract the children of the surrounding manors. The children of the other manors would only have to bring some food themselves, the rest I'll cover." Zhang Xiaobao was thinking even further.

“Are you sick?”

“You have medicine, ~ah? Not joking with you. With my allowing the children of the surrounding manors to come and study, the reputation will get out there. Once the disaster over there starts up next year, I’ll freely give away food grains over there—let’s see who will dare take back my family’s lands? I’ll use popular opinion⁴ to crush him to death.”

“Up to now, I still don’t understand what kind of person you are. This many operations with each making a bit of money, all for the sake of that piece of land with a grant of 100 heads in the end. Is it worth it?” Wang Juan had been constantly trying to figure out Zhang Xiaobao, wanting to know what his inner heart was actually like but kept on failing.

Zhang Xiaobao glanced at Wang Juan next to him and smiled: “Don’t go guessing men. At the same time, I also never think about how women actually think. Sometimes, we ourselves don’t even understand ourselves, much less understanding others, ~ne.

To tell the truth, I really don’t care. To lose or to gain are as nothing in front of me—I’m talking about money. But I also care very much. I know that my Mom and Dad, Grandpa and Grandma all hope to keep maintaining this family legacy. What I can do is to give them a hand.

The material gain and spiritual gain are separate. It’s just like if you gave money to a beggar on the street. Even if you don’t admit it on the surface, you subconsciously still treat yourself as a good person. For those animals to not be able to win over humans is not

only because humans can use tools but it's most fundamentally because at a given time, humans will take pity and sympathize with the weak and go on to ally with the weak."

"Don't speak of this with me. I don't understand. I only know that this world is an existence where the strong prey on the weak.⁵ I learned so many things for the sake of my family clan.⁶ Give and take—it's just that simple." Wang Juan felt like her own thinking had followed along with Zhang Xiaobao's at this moment and was extremely uncomfortable.

"Fine, let's not talk anymore. Since your family clan over there is no more, then let's remake a new family clan over here. We don't have impressive ancestors so let us become the next generation of impressive ancestors. It's snowing. One of the manor's oxen froze to death so there's ox marrow to eat."

Zhang Xiaobao really didn't wish for Wang Juan to obey him on everything so seeing that Wang Juan had reacted quickly, couldn't help but laugh.

"When did it freeze to death? How come I didn't hear of it?" Wang Juan used her tongue to lick her lips as she really did crave it.

"An ox from the family of the manor's Chen Hao.⁷ It really was too old and couldn't move to work anymore. Once the snow fell, it froze to death. I'm prepared to give him 6 guan [strings of cash] and he'll go report it. Once we return, we can eat beef."

“That’s not right? I still remember that his family’s ox was still living. In the morning, it even passed by in front of the courtyard house, ~ne. Besides, today isn’t even that cold. Once the snow fell, the temperature would have risen.” Wang Juan asked, wrinkling her brow as if recalling this morning’s events.

Zhang Xiaobao sadly shook his head: “Yes, ya. It was still fine this morning, ne. Who knew that in a while, it’d freeze to death here? If it didn’t freeze to death, then it was scared to death. The ox looked and such heavy snow, ~ah! It was over. It drank a mouthful of cold water and it suicided.”

“You craved it to this degree? To insist on butchering someone else’s ox to eat?” Wang Juan figured it out now. Of course, she wouldn’t go ask as to why an ox could die from drinking water. She could imagine that Zhang Xiaobao would definitely counter her by asking that since people can die from drinking water, why can’t an ox? This matter was impossible to debate.

“6 guan [strings of cash] is enough to buy a young ox. The money that the official will come over to request, I’ll pay. If a half-grown ox is bought, it can still be used when it’s spring plowing time. When we get back, I’ll make beef ligament for you to eat. It’s tender and chewy so it won’t ruin the teeth.” Zhang Xiaobao chose to use bribery.

“I want to eat tendons that have a bit of spicy flavor to it.”

The wind blew the drifting snow on which it relied, dressing the green mountains with some white clothing.

Once it got closer and closer to the New Year, the price of brown sugar doubled. Erniu obeyed Little Mister's instructions and immediately acted, transforming 20 silver taels into 60 taels. The money hadn't even been warmed up, ~ne, when he once again received a command from Little Mister to go commission large quantities of flat little bamboo baskets or little bamboo cases that were required to be made through weaving.

Once the first batch of bamboo baskets had been sent over, the cucumbers in the back of the courtyard of Zhang Manor's main house were already 3 cun [inch] long. Waiting for two or three more days to eat them was the best. If it were three or five days, then they'd be considered to have grown.

"Shiliu, here's three cucumbers. Let us three each have one per person. You help us peel the cucumbers." Wang Juan went to go pick three cucumbers that were, comparatively speaking, bigger and handed them over to Shiliu.

Shiliu woodenly accepted them and nodded her head: "Cucumbers, winter cucumbers—just the smell is nice. This single one needs how much money, ~ah? Just some time before, they looked to still be vines; here now, they've matured."

"Don't mind about how much money—just eat it. Quickly, Xiaobao and I are waiting, ~ne." Wang Juan hadn't eaten any vegetable greens for a month or more so seeing Shiliu was still in a daze, could only begin prodding her.

Shiliu finally recovered and began peeling. The three of them ate with great gusto.

Five days later, Song Jing-gong placed the bamboo case filled with six cucumbers that were still bearing flowers and thorns on the table in front of Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang.

Notes:

1] “Nian huo” (年貨) literally means “year goods” and specifically refers to the objects purchased in preparation for [Chinese New Year](#). It is similar to all the paraphernalia that would be prepared to be ready for the holidays in the West like Christmas trees, ornaments, decorations, food, presents, etc. Some of the items you would find in a shopping list for Chinese New Year are brown sugar (remember that it is called “red sugar” in Chinese so it would be good luck to eat since [red is considered a lucky color in Chinese culture](#)), fish, fruits, snacks, red-colored decorations that might include [spring couplets](#) or “chun lian” (春聯), along with any other things that would differ depending on the region since they each had their own traditions and take on what was considered necessary for a New Year’s celebration.

2] “Xiang qin” (鄉親) literally translates to “village relatives” and is basically a way to address those belonging to the same village as many villages in ancient China were established by members of the same family so the villagers would all end up being related to one another as one big extended clan, leading to marriages being a form of alliance between nearby villages to prevent inbreeding. Even villages that had been initially settled by several families would have the villagers consider each other like an extended family since after generations, a degree of intermarriage would have occurred and due to the familial feeling that would have been

nurtured from living in cooperation together for so many years. This sentiment would be similar to people hailing from the same city or state tending to feel a commonality to each other in comparison to those who are from a different part of the country.

3] [Dumplings](#) show up in a lot of different cuisines. “Jiaozi” ([餃子](#)) are a form that [dumplings can take in Chinese cuisine](#). For those that don’t know, jiaozi are made by wrapping up a prepared filling in dough skin. The content of the filling varied depending on personal preference or regional variety so they could consist of meat with minced vegetables or be wholly vegetarian. The way that the dumpling was wrapped could be an art and changed how the jiaozi looked. The act of wrapping the jiaozi was a group activity that served as a way to strengthen bonds in a lot of families in China and is a tradition that still persists today. After the jiaozi are made, they can be steamed, fried, or boiled. Jiaozi are a common dish eaten for [Chinese New Year](#) and are also considered a traditional dish to eat for winter. Since other types of dumplings in Chinese cuisine actually have their own names, I will be translating jiaozi as simply dumplings in English. For foodies who just want to drool over the pictures, go to the Baidu page [here](#).

4] “Min xin” ([民心](#)) is a term that can come up frequently in Chinese fiction that has ruling or governing as a theme. It literally translates to “citizen hearts,” which is related to “ren xin” ([人心](#)) or “people’s hearts.” However, the former is more specifically related to governance and popular sentiment while the latter is more general in connotation. Thus, I translated “min xin” ([民心](#)) as “popular opinion” here.

5] The Chinese expression used here is “ruo rou qiang shi” ([弱肉強食](#)) and literally means “weak meat, strong eat.” Equivalent English

sayings might be “law of the jungle” or “survival of the fittest” but it is basically an idiom to explain what the Chinese viewed as a cruel world where the weak served as food for the strong. This outlook is understandable if you consider the institutionalized upheaval that ancient China would regularly endure for several millennia with the rise and fall of dynasties that lead to great chaos and misery as well as loss of life for the populace.

[6\]](#) I am footnoting “jia zu” ([家族](#)) because it is quite noteworthy that Juan-Juan says “jia zu” ([家族](#)) rather than simply jia/家 or “family.” This word choice on her part means that her family has enough status in enough numbers or generations that they are considered a “clan” even in modern day China. This term can also be translated as “house” as in “Great House.” To differentiate between a normal family and a clan where it’s just larger extended family as well as avoid the connotations of nobility that come with “house,” I am translating this as “family clan.” Also, note that a [Chinese clan](#) can have some other requirements tied up with it other than a shared surname and blood relations.

[7\]](#) Chen Hao ([陳豪](#)) is surnamed Chen/[陳](#) and his name of hao/[豪](#) means “brave or bold.”

Chapter 39: Give Cucumbers To The County Magistrate To Sell

“These are cucumbers? They are cucumbers.” Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang looked at the six cucumbers in front of him, confusedly raising his head to ask Song Jing-gong. He didn’t understand what intention Song Jing-gong had to so hurriedly rush over here to give him cucumbers? Could it have something to do with a murder case or evidence?

“Milord is indeed impressive to be able to recognize with one look that these are cucumbers. That’s right. Milord, try them and see if the taste is palatable.” Song Jing-gong assumed that the Lord Magistrate had been frightened, ~ne, as he pointed at the cucumbers and bade him to try them.

“These I, this county, have already eaten a lot of before. Zijin should bring it back to eat on your own.” Cheng Lingxiang carefully looked over the cucumbers again but didn’t discover anything special¹ so now, he was unhappy here.

Song Jing-gong understood this time. So Cheng Lingxiang hadn’t considered what season it currently was and was only waiting for himself to give him the good stuff, ~ne. Cucumbers had always not been worth money so thinking of this, Song Jing-gong wasn’t angered either and gave a slight smile.

“Milord speaks rightly. After returning, Student will get some spicy sauce, then warm up some wine to taste the cucumbers and drink the wine while enjoying the snowy scenery outside. That

really would be a great pleasure of life, ~ah.”

As he spoke, Song Jing-gong made ready to stand up. Cheng Lingxiang was also following along and thinking of that kind of scenery, ~ne, but then kept feeling like there was someplace not right. It was only until Song Jing-gong spoke to take his leave that he finally realized and hurriedly called out: “Wait, Zijin, how did you get fresh cucumbers here in this deep winter?”

After asking this question, the gaze that Cheng Lingxiang redirected toward these cucumbers was no longer the same. The thorns on top were also good looking and the flowers were pretty as well, being a glittering green. The more he looked, the more he liked them. He even leaned his head over them to take a gentle sniff. The clear aroma unique to cucumbers entered his nose and was exceptionally pleasant.

Song Jing-gong, seeing this sort of behavior from the county magistrate, didn’t hurry to answer and only watched over there.

Cheng Lingxiang looked for a while and then stretched out a hand to touch them. The cucumbers had been kept warm so they weren’t cool and weren’t hot. At this time, the six cucumbers were no longer cucumbers in Cheng Lingxiang’s eyes but silver—six silver ingots that had been neatly placed there. Lushly green and nearly of equal thickness, perfectly straight—this silver was good looking.

“Milord, how about it? To eat this kind of cucumber in the winter, it is fairly enjoyable?” Song Jing-gong asked, finding the correct timing.

Cheng Lingxiang vigorously nodded his head twice: “Good, good stuff! Zijin has taken care. I didn’t think that with the snow already falling, I could still be able to eat fresh cucumbers. Don’t know how Zijin found these six cucumbers?”

In an instant, Magistrate Cheng thought of a lot of things. If these cucumbers were given to his superiors,² then his superiors would definitely acknowledge his merit. He just didn’t know how many cucumbers could be had.

“Student didn’t know if Milord wanted to eat them. Hence, in this trip here, six were brought over. If Milord feels that they are rather good, Student will send some more over after returning. It’ll be enough for Milord to eat for a winter.” Song Jing-gong had actually brought over quite a few this time, even preparing to sell them, ~ne, so deliberately spoke thusly.

“Where’d the cucumbers come from? To eat for a winter—could it be that there’s a technique to allow summer cucumbers to be kept until now?” Magistrate Cheng was the most curious in regards to this.

Song Jing-gong shook his head slightly and replied: “No technique. If summer cucumbers were picked, they could only be kept for 20 or so days at most and they wouldn’t even have flowers or thorns. The cucumbers were planted and grown. Two months or so prior, they were grown by that person at the manor up until today when it is just right for eating.”

Magistrate Cheng had originally been fixedly seated there but upon hearing that they'd been planted and grown, he stood up at once and firmly fixed his gaze at Song Jing-gong's eyes, wishing to know if he was lying or not. Seeing that Song Jing-gong's gaze was clear with no trace of evasion, he knew that it probably might be true.

“Zijin, quickly tell me how the cucumbers were planted and grown? Was it that adept again? Great ability! If this method was taught to our Great Tang's people, then wouldn't everyone be able to eat fresh cucumbers in the winter? Moreover, these cucumbers on this side as well as over in that northern area wouldn't take up any other lands in the winter so the people would have an extra stream of income.

Great deed—this is a great deed! Zijin, that person from your manor will certainly be commended and rewarded. How about this? Tomorrow, Zijin should return and bring back that person. This official, I will make my report.”

After standing up, Magistrate Cheng didn't sit back down either as he paced there with his hands behind his back, speaking as he walked without noticing at all that helpless look of Song Jing-gong's. After a while of hearing Song Jing-gong make not a single sound, only then did he stop to look over.

Song Jing-gong wryly smiled: “Milord, ~ah, the manor also needs to make money, ah, with that many people who need to be fed, ne. That person treats the peasants well. Today, every peasant was given a lot of things for free. And they were even afraid of the heavy snow badly crushing the houses so specifically spent money

to renovate the houses and build kang [bed-stove].

Milord knows how much money these cucumbers in the winter are worth, too. The manor is waiting on these cucumbers being sold off to better get some money, ~ne. Milord wants Student to tell but Student doesn't dare to. If that person were to be provoked, it would be of no use even if Student were to run to the ends of the earth.³ Milord, you [honorific] may not know of that person's methods but Student has already experienced them."

"Eh~! Right, ~ya! It wouldn't be expensive at all for one of these cucumbers to be sold for over 10 wen [cash] so there would naturally be those wealthy families who'd go buy them. In addition, it's nearly New Year's. To be able to eat a cool and refreshing bite of cucumbers on New Year's Eve,⁴ that mood would certainly not be the same."

With Song Jing-gong's explanation, Magistrate Cheng also realized it. Who would be willing to tell others this type of method? Since they could be grown, then they'd certainly be continuously eaten for several months. How much money could be earned in one winter? Just thinking about it was scary.

But if this stuff wasn't given away, then it wouldn't be so easily solved if they got noticed by people. He himself could know of the value of winter cucumbers; other people were also not stupid. By then, if even more formidable people were to be roused, then what to do?

Cheng Lingxiang pondered this kind of matter as he slowly sat

down. Then, glancing over at Song Jing-gong again, he finally opened his mouth to caution: “Zijin, ~ah, these cucumbers aren’t easy to do, ~ah! They easily attract the calamity of murder. Why hasn’t the adept from that manor of yours not thought of this point? If you sell them, then there’d be people who’d know. If you really aren’t willing to give up the method, then I’ll pretend that I didn’t see this today.”

“Milord is indeed a good official who is able to be considerate of the people under their governance. Milord, rest assured. Before coming, that person instructed Student that if Milord spoke thusly, to speak of the solution in response. If Milord had wholeheartedly wished to request credit,⁵ then Student would immediately return to uproot those cucumbers.”

In his heart, Song Jing-gong only had a single type of feeling towards Little Mister—a mountain peak to be looked up to.⁶

“Oh? This was even predicted? What is the solution?” Magistrate Cheng was also afraid. Was this still human? Each step was followed by another step to take.

“In reply to Milord, that method isn’t difficult, either. It’s to have the cucumbers transported over here and have Milord help to sell them. Milord need not rush. By then, if there are people who inquire, Milord can say that the Heavens sent down an auspicious favor⁷ and there’s a manor where the cucumbers vines actually bore new fruit.

It’s nearly New Year at this time so nobody would investigate

closely at this time. When the New Year has passed and the money has been more or less made, the manor won't continue selling them but will give some to Milord for Milord to gift to other people. If there are people checking and insist on asking Milord for the manor's location, then at that time, the cucumbers vines will naturally be destroyed by people."

Song Jing-gong spoke out loud the solution. In fact, there was another point that they'd mentioned so it could be said that he'd lied. What Zhang Xiaobao instructed him was this. There was another point. If this county magistrate didn't caution him, then he had to immediately return to completely harvest this batch of cucumbers, dig out the other cucumbers, and transport far away the harvested cucumbers to sell elsewhere using another identity to still be able to make a large fortune.

This wasn't the area that made Song Jing-gong most impressed in feeling but that Little Mister had said at the time that the county magistrate would help him to a very large extent in terms of considering the matter over. The alternative preparations were only for just in case.

Of course, Song Jing-gong wouldn't know how much psychology Little Mister had previously studied and that based on the several times that he'd had contact with the county magistrate, had speculated as to the county magistrate's temperament. He just assumed that Little Mister knew how to fortune-tell.⁸

Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang sighed once. There was no way to re-evaluate that person at the manor. This was not only to get the cucumbers sold but to give himself a meritorious credit.

Auspicious favor, ~ah! With the cucumbers as evidence, they caused people to be unable to disbelieve it. They said that it was to let him gift to others, was it even necessary to ask who he could be giving to?

He couldn't possibly reject such a good deal. A promotion, ~ah! Once the auspicious favor appeared, whatever his superiors thought, they would all follow along in asking for credit. By then, a future of his own could be had for the taking.

Having thought of it here, Magistrate Cheng nodded his head as he said: "That's fine. While it's before the New Year, pick a few more cucumbers. Wait until it's close to two days before the New Year and I'll sell them off. Zijin hasn't eaten yet, right? Perfect, let's use three cucumbers to make two dishes. Zijin can try them with me together."

Magistrate Cheng no longer treasured them. Since there was more, then the several other cucumbers for his family wouldn't be lacking. First, eat three. The other three could be sent to the back and his family members could try them, too.

Song Jing-gong didn't hurry to leave this time and gladly obeyed.

The chilly wind blew past from time to time. Even so, it still didn't cause the people from the two manors of Zhang and Wang to feel anything.

That old ox belonging to Chen Hao's family was killed. Also, one of the several oxen that Zhang Xiaobao had previously made people buy and bring back was killed, too. This ox really couldn't

avoid being killed as just after the one from Chen Hao's family had died, it actually fell into a ditch and broke its leg.

Once the two oxen were killed, the meat was plentiful. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan discussed it for a bit and had the people of the two manors eat a meal together. It could be considered to be promoting the good qualities of the master-family.

They naturally couldn't eat just beef as the meat from the two oxen really weren't enough to serve. Besides, some of it had to be kept to be eaten for New Year's. So they could only add some large radishes inside and make several cauldrons of beef with simmered radishes to call over the people of the manor to eat together with wotou [cone bread]⁹ made out of millet flour. Then, several kinds of pickled vegetables¹⁰ were prepared along with some lightly flavored stewed vegetables to be eaten while hot, which was not so bad in this winter.

This way, the two oxen weren't needed. A single ox, not counting the tendons, ligaments, and other assorted things, was enough with just the meat. Add a bit of beef tallow and a pot of stewed vegetables didn't require too much beef.

The peasants weren't picky, either. To have something to eat was good. That aroma from within several of the cauldrons didn't even wait for the meat to be done, ~ne, and had already drifted outward. The adults were a bit better and could endure it but the little kids sniffed up their snot while anxiously gulping down their drool. There were some who had more daring that even moved to the front of the pots to see.

For the sake of not letting everyone freeze, several fires had been piled up in the empty space outside. The peasants of the two manors surrounded them as they talked and laughed until the meat was ready. Then, they rose to do stuff to help out.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, the two of them had also rushed over here by this time, intending to eat a meal together with everyone. Wang Juan was even holding a bit of dried parsley in her hand while Zhang Xiaobao was carrying spicy sauce.

Notes:

[1\]](#) The Chinese text says that Magistrate Cheng didn't see that the cucumbers as having any "qian kun" ([乾坤](#)), which is likely based off of an idiom "nei you qian kun" ([内有乾坤](#)) or "inside has qian kun." "Qian Kun" ([乾坤](#)) itself is usually translated as "universe or heaven and earth" because it is a term derived from the name for 2 of the 8 trigrams of the [Bagua](#) ([八卦](#)) with qian/乾 representing heaven and kun/坤 representing earth. So qiankun/乾坤 itself has a broad range of possible interpretations and meanings depending on the context it is used in. The idiom of "nei you qian kun" ([内有乾坤](#)) usually applies to objects or people whose external appearance are contrary to their interior or contents like a bag of holding that looks like a normal bag on the outside but is really a pocket dimension on the inside or Xiaobao who outwardly looks like a pure and innocent toddler but in actuality, possesses the mentality of a middle-aged con man with a heart of gold. In this case, qiankun is being referred to as being absent so I chose to translate for the meaning.

[2\]](#) Similarly to Steward Zhang using "shang mian" ([上面](#)) to

euphemistically refer to paying taxes, Magistrate Cheng uses “shang mian” (上面) or “upper layer” to refer to his superiors since they are literally above him.

3] “Tian ya hai jiao” (天涯海角) literally means “sky shores, sea corners” and is used to describe the extreme reaches of the earth and the very boundaries at which it meets the sky and sea. This expression actually has its origins in an eulogy [Tang dynasty](#) essayist [Han Yu](#) (韓愈) wrote for his dearly beloved nephew who died just before Han Yu was about to reunite with him. The nephew died far away from Han Yu who still insisted on traveling there with the funerary offerings though the distance was intimidatingly long for the time. [[Baidu](#)]

4] “Nian Ye” (年夜) literally translates to “Year Night” but it basically refers to the night before [Chinese New Year](#). Traditionally on this night, families will dine together on symbolically lucky foods and stay up all night to greet the new year.

5] “Biao gong” (表功) is actually an abbreviation in Chinese for “showing off one’s exploits.” So it’s essentially an action that is asking for credit for one’s meritorious service. Since Chinese officials get graded on a yearly basis, usually as either one of three choices of exemplary, passing, and lacking, officials would make reports asking to be given credit for their good deeds and then the political struggle to ensure that they receive all the credit is an integral part of ancient Chinese politics (some might argue that it is still a part of modern Chinese politics).

6] “Gao shan yang zhi” (高山仰止) is actually an idiom with a play on words as it is literally evoking the image of a mountain whose

full height can't be seen as well as the image of someone gawking upward in awe at said mountain because yang/仰 can mean “to raise one's head” or “to admire, rely on.” Since mountains are considered symbols of strength and dependability in Chinese culture, this only deepens the dual metaphor of this expression.

7] “Xiang rui” (祥瑞) is the term given to things that were believed to be “auspicious signs” in Chinese culture that Confucian scholars tended to consider to be ways that Heaven can signal its approval and were of benefit to people. Thus, natural phenomena such as rainbow-hued clouds, double-eared rice paddies, a natural spring of sweet-flavored water, the appearance of various star formations, or exotic animals with different associated meanings such as giraffes (explaining why an old Chinese name for “giraffe” is [qilin](#)/麒麟 which are only supposed to show up when a sage is about to be born/die or if the current ruler is enlightened) and [white hinds](#) that are also a sign of Heaven's favor to a ruler could be considered to be signs of fortune. The reverse could be true as well though with other phenomena like comets or meteors.

8] “Neng qia hui suan” (能掐會算) breaks down to mean “can pinch, knows how to count” and since a lot of 4-character couplets actually separates and recombines two 2-character word combos to make a new meaning in Chinese, this expression intersperses neng/能 or “able” and hui/會 or “know how” in between the characters making up “qia suan” (掐算). “Qia suan” (掐算) itself needs to be explained as it literally means to “pinch count” and describes an ancient Chinese behavior where they counted using their fingers by bending them in a pinching motion. This behavior can go hand in hand with [Chinese astrology](#) and [fortune-telling](#) as [numerology](#) and arithmetic calculations makes up a large portion of these practices. Chinese fortune-telling itself is called “suan ming” (算命) in Chinese, which literally means “to calculate life.”

So a stereotypical image of a Chinese fortune-teller or astrologist is one who makes these needed calculations by pinching their fingers together in this fashion. Especially intelligent and cunning strategists who can make uncanny predictions of the future to the point that their side business might as well be fortune-telling could also be portrayed as having this mannerism as it fits the traditional Chinese stereotype of such a character. So if you're watching a Chinese drama or movie that has some occult subject matter of some sort and you're wondering why the Daoist priest, mystical formation expert, or cunning strategist is making those weird hand gestures, that's why. To see a picture for an example, go [here](#). Sorry, I couldn't find a specific video of an instance where you could see the gesture in action but the gesture appears a lot across a wide variety of genres in Chinese dramas and film because it serves as excellent visual shorthand for the Chinese viewer. Anyway, because of the reasons that I've explained above, I translated “neng qia hui suan” (能掐會算) as “know how to fortune-tell.”

9] “[Wotou](#)” (窩頭) or “wowotou” (窩窩頭) literally means “nest head” and is so named because of the conical nest-like shape this bread has. It is a steamed bread that is typically made out of wheat or millet flour and was a staple food for poor Chinese peasants. When corn was later imported into China, cornmeal was used to make wotou, explaining why it is sometimes translated as “Chinese cornbread.” It later became an imperial delicacy during the [Qing dynasty](#) (清朝) when by happenstance, [Empress Dowager Cixi](#) (慈禧太后) got to taste them and liked them enough to order the Imperial Kitchens to reproduce them with richer ingredients, causing them to become a food that was no longer just consumed by the impoverished. I chose to use the pinyin with [cone bread] in an editorial aside because it's perfect as a lame pun as well as reminding people of their shape. For pictures, you can visit the Baidu page [here](#).

[10\]](#) “Xian cai” ([鹹菜](#)) literally means “salted vegetables,” the name due to the fact that salt is necessary for the pickling process. Chinese cuisine usually treats pickled dishes as appetizers and they are more of a staple of northern Chinese cuisine since they would need to preserve vegetables for the winter. They can also be used as part of the raw ingredients of a cooked dish, too.

Chapter 40: Several Rounds Of Consideration, Winter Has Already Cooled

“Tasty, really tasty! Come on, Xiaobao, help me tear apart this meat. You pull on that end.”

The beef with simmered radishes was done. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, the two of them used a bowl to start eating there. What Shiliu found were those kinds of meat without any tendons that were smaller pieces. It was like this yet it was still a struggle for the two of them to eat as they had to use their hands to tear it into little strips to slowly chew on.

Wang Juan had discovered a piece that was larger and that her hands on her own weren't strong enough so she called over Zhang Xiaobao. Zhang Xiaobao on that side had already used both of his hands while Wang Juan on this side was also like so before this meat could be ripped apart here.

“This meat clearly isn't entirely mushy, ~ne, and they actually said that it could be eaten. Didn't even consider us two.” Zhang Xiaobao dipped that half piece of meat into the spicy sauce and shoved it inside his mouth to laboriously chew on as he complained.

“When others eat meat, they eat it for this chewiness. If it's all mushy, then what bite would it have? I'm not eating meat; it's too much effort. Let's drink some soup and eat some radishes.” Wang Juan, having not so easily swallowed down that meat, opted for a change in palate.

Shiliu wasn't willing to eat together with this many people and just stood by the sidelines to wait upon the two little ancestors. So upon hearing Wang Juan's words, she went to ladle out from the pot some radishes and soup, sprinkling the pieces of parsley that had already been chopped up in advance on top. To drink a mouthful, the taste wasn't so bad at all.

A little kid from the manor, seeing that the two most treasured people of the two manors were actually just eating radishes and not eating meat, was moved at that moment and said to his parents next to him:

“Dad, Mom, Little Mister, they are only eating radishes and leaving the meat all to us. If I tell Ge Manor's Xiaogou-er¹ this, he definitely wouldn't believe me. But this is true.”

His parents were also touched. They weren't moved because Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan drank soup and ate radishes. They also knew that a little child that big basically couldn't bite into beef.

What they were moved by was that Little Mister and Little Miss didn't take on any appearance of superiority from a lofty height but ate together with them. The outdoor weather was sure cold, ~ah! And this meal had also been specifically prepared by them. They were this little and they were like this, which only proved one thing and that was that those members of the master-family all usually taught the children like this.

With such a master-family, what else did they themselves as such peasants have to be dissatisfied about? They both had rushed back here from outside. When they had arrived, they had also encountered questions from Ge Manor's people. Once they said that it was the master-family who was treating them to beef, even now they couldn't forget the looks from those of Ge Manor.

“Xiaobao, you see how happily the fellow villagers are eating? In the future, if we can regularly have a meal together with the fellow villagers, that'd be good. Pity that the amount of beef is too little. This time, we were actually fined 12 taels of silver. Why isn't this gang of officials even considerate of us?”

Wang Juan drank a few sips of soup but was too hasty in eating so sat there to rest for a bit while complaining to Zhang Xiaobao.

Zhang Xiaobao originally wanted to reply: ‘Indeed, there aren't any good people who'd become officials. It's all the same no matter the dynasty era.’

But his words changed upon reaching his mouth as he didn't wish to let Wang Juan recall the matters of the past. Everybody was all happy, ~ne. Why bring up the memories? So he could only say:

“With oxen, this thing is valuable after all—they can be used to plow the lands, ~ne. This only shows that they pay close attention to agriculture. Actually, horses would do as well but they've all been used for equipping the troops or to pull carriages. Don't know if there are any curved plows² right now? Wait till we get back to ask. If there are, then never mind. If not, let's make them

ourselves. I remember that several ox bones had been placed in the pot. Let's eat the bone marrow."

"Not eating it. Give that bit of stuff to the children to eat. There's still quite a few at home, ~ne. What are you doing, grabbing their stuff? You know how to breed oxen? The kind where each birth can be guaranteed and can also have one pregnancy every year."

Wang Juan's eyes lit up upon hearing about eating the bone marrow but then her eyes dimmed as she thought of doing animal husbandry.

Zhang Xiaobao scooped up a piece of beef tallow that had been floating on top of the soup to send over in front of Wang Juan's mouth: "Don't know. Didn't learn it back then. In prison, there was a person who was a specialist in this area— a real specialist. He wrote a dissertation that had been snatched away by someone else so he had wanted to prove that it had been written by him. In the end though, their family's influence was large and got him locked up.

At that time, he saw that I was eager to learn and really wanted to teach me. Unfortunately, I didn't have any thoughts to learn it at that time and only listened to him endlessly introduce some things about agriculture and animal husbandry next to me. The amount of times that he mentioned curved plows was a lot and I remembered it in response since he would always praise this type of plow.

I remember I had been following along and learning stuff from a criminal thief next to me at that time. I learned how to pry open

doors and locks from that person. That isn't only about knowing the principle that would work; it also requires training of the listening ability and sense of touch. Later on, I would always carry on my person some iron wires of different widths along with various sized magnets."

"Magnets? What did you need magnets for? Prying open security vaults seems to not require them?" Wang Juan was gradually hooked by Zhang Xiaobao's words. As one who specialized in catching thieves, she was interested in this area.

"What security vaults? It was for door locks. Some door locks require the use of magnets to work. Those keys itself were magnetic with some attracting the other and some repelling the other. The magnets I carried not only had to be different sizes, they must also have to have two types of magnetism on this end. It was technical work. I think that if I were able to be awarded a degree, whatever was said, I'd be a master's degree. The one who taught me, that one was absolutely a doctorate."

Zhang Xiaobao poured away the soup that had cooled down and while he had Shiliu continue ladling, he spoke to Wang Juan as if telling a joke.

"That is to say that you comprehend the principle behind locks? You can make locks?" Wang Juan began to ask curiously.

"That's a matter of course. If you want to pry them open, then you must know how to make them."

“Then, you make locks to sell.” Wang Juan suggested.

“No, there’s no springs so what would I use to make them with? Eat quickly. After we’re full, we’ll go back to sleep.” Zhang Xiaobao directly rejected it.

Wang Juan was only asking randomly so seeing that it wasn’t possible, she didn’t speak anymore. Eating up the soup and radishes, she patted her belly. She was full.

After those two had left, the speed that the people on this side ate with also accelerated. Before, they’d been controlling it, ~ne. After finishing off a meal, the leftover bones could all be brought over to give to those who had children being fed milk in their families. When they returned, they could cook them twice or more so that the bone marrow inside could either be fed directly to the child or given to the mother to eat, whichever was fine.

They were eating at the manor. Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang here was also eating—a total of six dishes and one soup with four meat dishes and two vegetarian. One of the vegetarian dishes was dressed³ cucumber strips with mashed garlic⁴ added, which had a refreshing taste when eaten. The other one was chicken eggs with stir-fried cucumbers, the clear fragrance pleasing to people. The soup was cucumbers and green garlic⁵ soup with an even balance of saltiness.

Song Jing-gong engaged the county magistrate in conversation while drinking wine. The dishes he ate were all basically those four meat dishes and the cucumbers were essentially not touched. After he returned, he could eat however much he wanted to eat so he

had no need to struggle against the county magistrate over this mouthful. One and a half of the cucumbers had been dressed, one had been stir-fried with eggs, and half had been simmered into soup.

Upon seeing the county magistrate make such calculations, how could he dare eat them?

Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang didn't think that much on it as with a beaming face, he said some words on scholarly study and composed a poem that he considered to be rather good on the spot. After receiving flattery from Song Jing-gong, he picked up two cucumbers strips to place into his mouth and carefully savor its taste before he finally broached the main topic.

“Zijin, ~ah, that manor of yours isn't far from here, right?”

“Yes, Milord speaks correctly. It's not considered far as one day is enough to be able to rush back and forth in a round trip.” Song Jing-gong toasted him with wine as he replied.

“Not far is good, ~ah. Since it's not far, have the adept from that manor of yours come over. I wish to meet this person.” Magistrate Cheng in fact wanted to get an assistant. If he really could recruit that person by his side, then he himself wouldn't need to worry anymore.

Song Jing-gong was frightened as he shivered. To get Little Mister and Little Miss to come in this cold weather, what to do if they were frozen? Moreover, with two little kids that small, if they

were really pushed forward, wouldn't that be harmful? Whatever else was said, this couldn't be consented to.

“Milord, this won't do, ~ah! That person's temper is eccentric and it's only since that manor previously saved his life before so that he arrived here. Student has also never seen his face before. Each time, the talking was done while separated by a screen.⁶ How about this? If Milord has any instructions that need to be told to that side, Student will help relay it.”

Of course, Song Jing-gong knew what the county magistrate wanted to do. The meaning of these words was also clear. Magistrate, if you have something that you need help with, I'll help you go over there to ask. When they come up with an idea, then I'll come back here to tell you.

Magistrate Cheng's expression had a trace of regret. Nodding his head, he ladled some soup into his own bowl and drank it all down in one breath before he said: “That's fine. Then, it'll be hard on Zijin. Is Zhou Xihu still secured over there?”

“This person Mister Zhou is not bad. Only, there is a shortage of brown sugar in the surrounding area recently. Why doesn't Milord persuade him? If there's too much white sugar, it won't be easy to sell either. After all, the price is high.

Oh, Student recalled another matter. That person said that when it's New Year's, Milord might wish to bring some food and oil to see to the impoverished families within the county. After all, Milord loves the citizenry like his own son and causes the people under Milord's governance to also feel the benevolence of the

Imperial Court.⁷ The manor can take out 1,000 dan [stone] of food and 100 dan [stone] of oil for Milord to spread his virtue.”

Following this, Song Jing-gong mentioned another matter. This was also previously arranged for.

Magistrate Cheng’s eyes brightened and he certainly understood the meaning of these words. This was to let him net political achievements, ~ne. If they really did this, along with the cucumbers that had been sent over, then this year’s evaluation would certainly be high-grade.⁸ That adept really did understand how the world worked. A pity that they couldn’t come to his side to help him out.

Right then, he said: “Good. This county, I know. It isn’t easy for the people either, ~ah. Especially the families that have those who are ailing. For that manor of yours to do as such, this county, I will remember it all in my heart. I trust that the people will also be endlessly grateful, too. Come, Zijin, eat.”

Waiting until after they’d more or less eaten their fill, Song Jing-gong took his leave and pledged that two days afterward, a large amount of cucumbers would be sent over so he let Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang set his heart at ease.

The day gradually grew late as each family and household all started to prepare their food.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan, the two of them also got busy again as they took up station in the kitchens to command them as

tonight's staple food was to be made according to the intentions of the two of them.

The prepared dough was rolled into thin sheets, one after another, and then sliced into string after string—these were noodles,⁹ an item that this side originally already had. Then slicing the well-sauced beef into pieces, they were fried using oil in a pan together with spicy sauce and chicken eggs. Placing a layer of cucumber strips and parsley on top of the beef slices and the noodles that had been ladled out from the ox bone soup, a serving of beef-fried sauce noodles¹⁰ was finished being made.

This time, the beef wasn't cooked to be nearly so tough so the two of them could also eat some as well. Sesame oil¹¹ was sprinkled on just before it was placed on the table to serve and without even needing any vegetables, it could be eaten with comfort.

“Xiaobao, does anything need to be prepared for New Year's?” Wang Juan ate together with Zhang Xiaobao's family members so after gulping down a mouthful of noodles into her belly, she asked this using lip speech.

“Let's make some firecrackers. Make simpler ones—use the proportion of 1 saltpeter to 2 sulfur to 3 charcoal to make them with. Just hearing a bang is fine. Don't want that kind that's 75% but 10 or 15.” Zhang Xiaobao hesitated for a bit before he spoke of this idea.

1] “Xiaogou-er” (小狗兒) basically means “little dog (puppy), child.” It is most likely a nickname that was chosen by his parents to confuse any spirits from taking the child away.

2] “Qu yuan li” (曲轅犁) is the name for the [Tang dynasty](#) era improvement made to the [heavy plows](#) that had previously been used in ancient China since the [Han dynasty](#). The name itself means “bent till plow” and refers to the curved mouldboard that made it easier for ancient Chinese farmers to plow the land. Since the mouldboard being curved is the reason for its name, I am translating this term as “curved [mouldboard plow](#)” or “curved plow” for short. For diagrams, go to the Baidu pages [here](#) and [here](#).

3] “Liang ban” (涼拌) is the Chinese term for dressing a food item (usually vegetables) in sauce and serving them uncooked. This explains why the term basically means “cool mix” and is basically the closest version of a salad in Chinese cuisine. For some pictures of different types of these dishes, visit the Baidu page [here](#).

4] “Suan ni” (蒜泥) literally means “garlic mud” but basically refers to garlic that has been crushed until it is like mud. It was used medicinally as well as for consumption purposes. For a picture of what it looks like, go to the Baidu page [here](#).

5] “Suan miao” (蒜苗) literally means “[garlic](#) sprouts” though the sprout or stalk that grow out of garlic bulbs are referred to as “[scapes](#)” in English. They can be translated as [leeks](#) due to the close relationship that garlies have with them being from the same genus but these are specifically garlies that have been allowed to grow past the bulb stage and into the “[scallion](#)” stage (scallions

tending to be a generic term for the immature shoots of the bulbed vegetables of the [Allium genus](#)). Because of this, they can also be referred to as “green garlic” or “qing suan” (青蒜). To avoid confusion with cong/葱 which specifically refers to the [Allium fistulosum](#) that I’d previously translated as scallion, I will be translating “suan miao” (蒜苗) as “green garlic.”

6] “Ping feng” (屏風) literally means “shield wind” and is usually known as “[folding screen](#)” in English because of how many of them were designed to fold like accordions. Screens first originated in ancient China as a single-paneled version during the [Zhou dynasty](#) before their folded version were invented during the [Han dynasty](#). A few centuries later, this furniture design was then exported elsewhere in Asia before being imported into Europe starting in the 17th century as part of the [Chinoiserie movement](#). Chinese screens could be made up of single panels but the type that grew popular during the [Tang dynasty](#) were the folding type screens where several single panels that were beautifully decorated were hinged together. Screens were typically used as room dividers and/or privacy screens in Asia. These screens were usually made from either wood or paper and silk with the latter two materials causing the screens to have some degree of transparency, causing the screens to be more art pieces than full-on privacy screens. The paper and silk screens tended to serve as canvases for scholars in displaying their calligraphy and painting skills. Screens were also a common way to display embroidered art. [Byoubu](#) (びょうぶ/屏風) are the Japanese incarnation of folding screens. You can see different examples of Chinese screens on the Baidu page [here](#).

7] “Chao Ting” (朝廷) literally means “dynasty court” and refers to the seat of government for ancient China. This is a term that can be used to refer to the imperial government in the abstract sense (i.e. decrees or laws that affect the entire nation down to the local

level) or specifically to point at the highest levels of authority that included the Emperor, Chancellor, and senior ministers. Technically, local authorities were considered part of the imperial government but were also separate from it because they were the hands on governors but not the ruling administrators. This is similar to how the local or state government in the U.S. can be representative of American government in general but the label of the U.S. government tends to refer specifically to only the federal level of government.

[8\]](#) Magistrate Cheng is referring to the yearly evaluation all officials were subjected to that formed a large basis for deciding whether they'd get promoted, demoted, or continue serving. Naturally, a lot of politics and behind the scenes string pulling was done before the results were decided on since it was usually a subjective assessment done by the official's superiors. This is why bribery and toadying were part of the usual operating procedure for officials in ancient China.

[9\]](#) “Mian tiao” (麵條) literally means “dough strings” and generically refers to [Chinese noodles](#) that are typically used in soup noodle dishes. There are regional variations on the recipe, leading to different specialty noodles, but this is general name that they would be categorized under in Chinese. Sometimes, noodles can be referred to as simply mian/麵 which can be confusing because that is also how the dough or flour can be referred to in Chinese. For pictures, you can visit the Baidu page [here](#).

[10\]](#) “[Zhajiang mian](#)” (炸醬麵) is a Chinese dish that is made using noodles topped by a deep-fried sauce or “zhajiang” (炸醬). The sauce that is fried can vary depending on the region and is traditionally one that uses beef or pork in the preparation though

vegetarian or seafood versions exist too. Other ingredients can be added to the dish in addition to the sauce. In this case, cucumbers were added on top of the sauce being fried up with some beef.[Jajangmyeon](#) (자장면/炸醬麵) is the Korean version of this dish.

[11\]](#) The Chinese text uses “xiang you” ([香油](#)) or “fragrant oil,” which is another name for [sesame oil](#) or “zhi ma you” (芝麻油).

Chapter 41: Selling Vegetables By The County Seat's Entrance

The sky was black and the clouds dark as the flying snow flooded the air with the blowing wind tinting their appearance.

Kaiyuan year 2, the 26th of the 12th lunar month,¹ three days after the Little New Year² had passed, winter's fourth snowfall floated downward. This snowfall was a bit heavier than the several ones prior as sheet after sheet fell down like scraps of paper.

Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang was the busiest these days as not only did the affairs of the yamen [govt. offices] have to be arranged for, he also had to help sell the cucumbers as the over 5,000 catties of cucumbers that had been accumulated had to be sold off over these next few days. These had all been transported over here by Song Jing-gong successively for these past few days.

Other than these cucumbers that had to be sold off, there were also 200catties that had been left solely to Magistrate Cheng. As for who he gave them to, that wasn't anything anyone else should control.

When it had reached noon, Cheng Lingxiang donned his official robes³ and led a group of his subordinates to the site of a warehouse in the county. These people from the yamen [govt. offices] up to now still didn't know what the Lord Magistrate wanted to do. They had all gone on holiday here but they had still been called out here.

Following the warehouse door opening with a squeaking “zhi-ya-ya” sound, countless baskets that had been woven out of bamboo appeared in front of their eyes. Cheng Lingxiang knew that there were cucumbers that had been processed using some preservation methods and the older ones were all over a dozen days old with the fresh ones having just been shipped over here this morning.

“Milord, you [honorific] called us over here just for the sake of looking at these baskets?” Sanshui County Deputy Magistrate⁴ Zhang Mingsheng⁵ asked what everyone else was thinking in their hearts.

Cheng Lingxiang enigmatically shook his head and used one of his hands to point at one of the baskets: “Someone come and open up the basket.”

Over there, person naturally came forward to carefully open up one of the baskets in front of them. What appeared in front of their eyes was a layer of silk. Turning their head to look at the Lord Magistrate, they with his encouragement lifted away this layer of silk only to suddenly cry out uncontrollably in astonishment.

Only to see that under this silk were cucumbers bearing flowers and thorns on top that had been neatly stacked in place one after another. They turned their head around to look at the snow that was still drifting about outside. This person felt like they themselves hadn’t gotten the season wrong as it really was winter. But the cucumbers in front of their eyes were also not fake.

“Mi-Milord, cucumbers, this, these are all cucumbers?” This person turned his head to look at the Lord Magistrate, stammering a bit as he spoke yet still seeming to wish to receive confirmation from the county magistrate’s mouth.

“Unh, they are cucumbers. These are all cucumbers with a total of over 5,000 catties. The Heavens sent down an auspicious favor, ~ah. There is a manor that actually had those cucumbers vines that originally should have died bear new cucumbers. Yesterday night, this official, I already wrote the imperial report.⁶ After a while, I will have someone send it out.”

What Cheng Lingxiang wanted was this kind of result. Back when he first saw the cucumbers and was clear on which season it was, he was also like this. Seeing this, his own surprise back then wasn’t so excessive; other people were also the same way.

The other people from the yamen [govt. offices] also stepped forward in succession to look as each and every one wanted to use their hands to touch them but feared that they’d knock off the thorns and flowers on top of the cucumbers. So they all deeply inhaled there to enjoy the aroma that the cucumbers brought along with them.

Deputy Magistrate carefully used his hand to pinch the bottom part of a cucumber to raise in front of his face to take a closer look. Then, sticking his nose closer to smell it, he nodded: “An auspicious favor, it really is an auspicious favor. Just don’t know which manor has had an auspicious favor appear?”

“Which manor is not urgent at this time. By then, everyone will

naturally know. Right now, help this official, I carry the cucumbers out; we'll take to the streets to sell them at 1 catty for 30 wen [cash]. At most, 5 catties can be bought at one time. If they wish to buy more, they will have to line up in the back."

Magistrate Cheng didn't wish to let other people know of Zhang Manor's location right now. There, some cucumbers could still be produced, ~ne. If there were to be people who went investigating right now, that side would immediately make all of the cucumbers vines die off. It'd be a pity.

At this moment, what needed to be done was to help with selling them off. 30 wen [cash] for 1 catty was the price that the adept over there had set. They'd initially agreed that people with no money wouldn't enjoy this stuff—even if you were to sell them at 10 wen [cash] for 1 catty, there'd still be no one who'd be willing to buy them. People with money didn't care if it was 10 wen [cash] or 30 wen [cash].

This was still the price for a single day today in order to allow some of the people buying them to take them back to try first. Only the earliest 2,000 catties had been brought out to sell today. If they weren't completely sold off, then tomorrow it'd be for 50 wen [cash]; the day after would be 80 wen [cash]; the next day after that would be 100 wen [cash]. The closer it got to the New Year, the higher the price would get.

"Milord, to do this doesn't seem to be good. We're all government officials of the Imperial Court; if we go selling vegetables, this will get us impeached⁷ by others." Deputy Magistrate, upon hearing that he himself and these people would

need to personally sell cucumbers, felt that it was a bit difficult on his face so tried persuasion beside him.

“How is it selling vegetables, ~ne? What we’re selling are auspicious favors. Quickly go get the scale.⁸ That kind that can measure up to 1 qian [mace] in weight is needed. Carry out 2,000 catties for this official, I and move them to the yamen [govt. offices] entrance. This official, I want to promote the auspicious favors there for the sake of the Imperial Court.”

Cheng Lingxiang had already considered this point well in advance so he simply didn’t even mention the matter of selling the vegetables.

“But Milord, this price is also a bit too expensive.” Deputy Magistrate was still a bit hesitant.

Cheng Lingxiang glared at him: “What’s to say it’s selling? Speaking to you guys, it’s selling but to the outside, it’s not selling. It’s giving—giving auspicious favors. Those people spending money are requesting auspicious favors and at 30 wen [cash] for 1 catty, they can receive them.”

Understood. The other people all understood. The Lord Magistrate here was playing a pretty hand—he’d have the reputation as well as the fortune. The Deputy Magistrate also couldn’t deny it that this truly was a good excuse. So he focused his attention on the sale—oh, no—the matter of the gifted money.

“Milord, don’t know the money gained after they’re all given

away, will it...? Will it be fine to just give that manor a little bit?"

When Cheng Lingxiang heard the Deputy Magistrate's words, he instinctively retreated a step as if afraid of being implicated by the Deputy Magistrate. How could he dare touch that sum of money? He didn't fear that manor; he feared that adept. This money added up was several hundred taels. They were waiting for the New Year, ~ne. If it really got embezzled, those consequences...

Upon thinking of this, he glared at the Deputy Magistrate and said: "This money all has to be given to that manor. We are government officials who are promoting the benevolence of the Imperial Court a little and only have auspicious favor. Wait until the day of the 30th; everyone will still have to go out with me. That manor is virtuous and took out on their own 1,000 dan [stone] of food and 100 piculs [hundredweight]⁹ of vegetable oil to let us all show kindness to the impoverished families of the county."

"Milord, we understand." Deputy Magistrate had finally cleared it up here now. The Lord Magistrate had already talked it over with that manor; by then, they'd help the county come out with an auspicious favor and even gave a chance to net political achievements.

Once the matter was decided, the people of the yamen [govt. offices] began to act as they moved basket after basket of cucumbers to place into the horse carriage outside that had followed them here. A basket was around 50 catties and they moved a total of 40 baskets. They didn't need other people to remind them and were consciously careful. 30 wen [cash], ~ah! A single cucumber could be exchanged for several dou[gallon]¹⁰ of

rice.

The snow outside didn't show any signs of stopping though it did allow the weather to not be so cold. Four large carriages hauling the cucumbers returned to the front of the county seat where someone had already taken out the scale and prepared to start selling.

Everyone was rather not concerned about them not selling. Don't just look at how scarily expensive they were. To eat cucumbers in the heavy winter, that was a rather unique thing. People with money were plentiful; what fear was there that they wouldn't spend the money to buy them?

It was only that these people were all thinking that since the cucumbers were so expensive, if their own families were to buy 2 catties, whether they'd be willing or not. Really wanted to eat them, ~ah!

“Unh, the person from that manor said that everyone here and this official, I have managed the people in the county with hard effort and high merit so wait until the selling is finished on the 29th of the 12th lunar month and every person will be able to bring 5 catties of cucumbers home. It's New Year's so try something fresh.”

Cheng Lingxiang seemed to understand his subordinates' thinking and began to leisurely speak there while at the same time, he sighed over Zhang Manor knowing how to act.¹¹ Last time when giving him silver, they were like this. This time, they were also like so.

When everyone heard this, they all grew happy while being simultaneously surprised at the generosity of that manor. The entire yamen [govt. offices] added up was a hundred or more people, ~ah! And they directly gave away so much. They'd wait until after they found out which family's manor it was; when there were problems, whatever help was needed, they'd have to help out with.

Cheng Lingxiang observed his subordinates' expressions with satisfaction as he continued to speak: "That manor also said that to just have vegetables isn't enough. Every person will also bring home 3 catties of vegetable oil and 5 catties of carrots. After returning, those carrots will need to be fried using oil as they said that they are good for the body. Don't eat them together with other radishes and they also shouldn't be eaten when drinking wine."

Everybody nodded their heads in succession. Of course, they knew of those carrots and vegetable oil, especially how the carrots were to be eaten. Earlier, the people selling them had already advised that eating them when drinking wine, it actually was nothing. It was just that there was a possibility of getting sick.

At the same time, the prices of these two types of things were all not cheap—especially those carrots at 20 wen [cash] for 1 catty. Only a little was sold to the restaurants each day. Looking at it here, this vegetable oil, cucumbers, spicy sauce, and carrots all should have originated from one family, Zhang Manor.

This time, they had all guessed it but when they looked at the

Lord Magistrate's eyes and the good stuff that they got from this time, each and every one of them all chose to be oblivious. They weren't foolish, either. They knew that once this matter was spread, then Zhang Manor wouldn't do well. If the manor wasn't doing well, then did they still want to get any stuff in the future?

Magistrate Cheng regretted it after he finished speaking. They'd already told him in advance to speak of the matter of the carrots and vegetable oil on the final day. In the end, he hadn't been able to hold himself back at the moment. So seeing that each and every one of his subordinates all seemed to understand, he could only add:

“The people of that manor also don't have it easy. Wait until the 29th, the items will be given to you all together then. When you go home, bring them out to let your family members taste them. If you have close relatives and good friends, you can have another sort of dish when dining, too.”

These words were spoken extremely clearly. When you go home, you can show off but you can't speak of the manor even to friends and relatives. Everybody naturally nodded and agreed.

Finished with these dealings, a basket full of cucumbers was opened. The constables¹² of the yamen [govt. offices] didn't require instructions and straight away began to call out: “Auspicious favors! Our dynasty's auspicious favors! Winter cucumbers! Fellow villagers should all come and see! Just 30 wen [cash] for 1 catty and you can invite it into your homes.”

Selling cucumbers in heavy winter by the entrance of the yamen

[govt. offices]—this was something new. Just after a voice yelled out, quite a few people suddenly gathered around with a “hua-la” sound to watch.

“Xiaobao, add a bit less gunpowder—the strength is too much. Come over and help me make the wicks.” Within Zhang Manor, Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao both found an extremely isolated room and were currently inside making firecrackers with Shiliu.

It was snowing outside and the sky was overcast so it was a bit dark inside the room but they all didn’t dare to light even a single lamp. All of the tables, stools, and other things inside the room had been moved out so that it was empty with only four walls and a flat ground.

On the ground, paper that had already been cut was placed. There was also some powdery stuff evenly mixed out of the three items of sulfur, saltpeter, and charcoal. Shiliu wrapped a bit more powder inside the larger papers while on that side, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan packed these powders into some narrow papers. Once one was packed, some more powder was rolled onto the exterior.

Zhang Xiaobao helped Wang Juan make several pieces before going over there again to roll firecrackers. Inside one, quite a few had already been rolled up and more was still being placed. When he was pulled back over again by Wang Juan, he continued to make wicks.

Notes:

1] “[La yue](#)” (臘月) means “sacrificial month” and refers to the yearly ritual in which sacrifices are made to the ancestors that occurred around this time period. “La yue” (臘月) is the name for the 12th lunar month within the [traditional Chinese calendar](#), which is also known as the “farming calendar” or “nong li” (農曆). This is also the month that the [Laba Festival](#) (臘八) is celebrated, which is on the 8th of the month and explains the Chinese name since it means “sacrificial 8.” [Laba congee](#) (臘八粥) is traditionally prepared (with recipes that varied depending on the family and region), shared, and eaten during this festival.

2] “Xiao nian” ([小年](#)) means “little year” as in “Little New Year” because it is a celebration that is only surpassed by the one for New Year’s and usually refers to a traditional Chinese holiday that marks the beginning of the festivities for the upcoming New Year, which is similar in nature to the [Advent of Christmas](#) in the West. It can be translated as “Preliminary Eve” for this reason. In northern China, the date of this holiday is set to be the 23rd of the 12th lunar month while in southern China, it is the 24th. This is also when the [Kitchen God](#) (Zao Shen/灶神) or Kitchen Lord (Zao Jun/灶君) is worshipped as he is believed to protect the household and family. Most importantly though, this is when he is known to leave for the Celestial Court in order to make his annual report on the family’s deeds to the [Jade Emperor](#) (with the help of his wife’s notes) so a part of the celebrations for the Preliminary Eve or Little New Year usually entailed offering food and incense to him as well as smearing honey on the lips of his paper effigy in a ritualistic act of bribery. This holiday is thus also known as “Ji Zao Jie” ([祭灶節](#)) or “Kitchen Offering Festival.”

3] “Guan Fu” ([官服](#)) or “official clothes” are the robes that served as uniforms for the government officials and made them easy to tell apart from the populace. The [mandarin squares](#) or rank badges

signifying the official's level would not be on Magistrate Cheng's robes though as they only started appearing during the [Yuan dynasty](#) as decorations before being formalized as official insignia in the [Ming Dynasty](#). [Gwanbok](#) (관복/官服) are the Korean adaptation of this kind of attire. For some pictures of what the official robes might have looked like over the ages, go to the Baidu page [here](#).

4] “Xian Cheng” (縣丞) literally means “county assistant/deputy” and is the position that is second in command to the county magistrate. They were normally in charge of clerical work and supervising the county warehouses. Hence, I have translated this term as “deputy magistrate.”

5] Zhang Mingsheng (張明升) is surnamed Zhang/張 (the same as Xiaobao) and his given name of Mingsheng (明升) means “brightness rising.”

6] “Zou zhe” (奏摺) were formal reports sent by the official to the Emperor. The name literally means “imperial memorial/report, folded/bent” because these papers were usually folded for the sake of the Emperor's reading convenience. Other names in Chinese that they could be called by were “zhezi” (折子), “zou zhang” (奏章) and “zou tie” (奏帖). Technically, this was a [Qing dynasty](#) improvement on the existing historical system of “zhang biao” (章表) or “essay report,” which were a way for feudal vassals to either thank their lord for their benevolence in essay compositions (zhang/章) and/or to inform their lord of something in reports (biao/表). The [Han dynasty](#) implemented them as formal essays that were written in [classical Chinese](#) to be submitted to superiors that was ostensibly a right available to anyone since it was meant to serve as an alternative way of providing oversight and reporting

grievances against corrupt officials. However, more often than not, these reports were controlled or monitored by a corresponding bureaucratic office and prevented this petition system from being open to the public. The Qing dynasty implementation provided the Emperor with an alternative source of information that came directly from all levels of the government to combat the excessive filtering of information that occurred with normal official reports that traveled up the bureaucratic chain. These reports are typically translated as “[memorial to the throne/Emperor](#)” but for the sake of brevity, I will translate them as “imperial reports.” I will just assume that the author is referring to the pre-Qing version and is only using the term that modern Chinese people would be more familiar with to refer to it...

7] “Tan he” (彈劾) is the process through which officials of ancient China could be accused of wrongdoing by their peers, which could not only include currently serving officials but also those who had retired from political life in good standing and thus still retained the ability to petition the Emperor or Imperial Court. There were also scholar-gentry members and nobles who received high enough honorary titles to gain the ability to submit imperial reports or petitions though they might not have ever served within the government. The crimes that an official could be accused of or impeached for could range in severity since they could be for petty mistakes or crimes that were outright treason so the level of punishments given if the official was found guilty could vary as well. The least severe punishment might be a salary fine but the worst sentence might result in not only the official’s execution for a capital offense but also the death or exile of their extended family and/or clan. Because it is more of a judicial and legal process within the system that serves police government officials and thus separate and different from the process through which court cases were opened due to a petition by a commoner, I will be translating

this term as “[impeachment](#).” Note that because of how the process is reliant on a peer starting it, situations where innocent officials were falsely accused could occur, especially since “[innocent until proven guilty](#)” wasn’t really a basic principle of the Chinese legal system. The nature of ancient Chinese politics meant that the accuser starting the impeachment process could be motivated by a number of reasons such as being part of an opposing political faction, a preemptive strike to prevent their own impeachment, getting rid of a rival, for personal profit or gain, etc. This provided great fodder for a lot of drama in Chinese historical fiction.

8] Cheng/秤 (or cheng/稱) was the traditional Chinese balance scale that was commonly used in the markets. It typically had a hook at one end from which the item being weighed would be suspended with the other end reserved for the counterweight to use to determine how heavy the object was. A lighter handheld rod version might be used when weighing herbs for use in [traditional Chinese medicine](#). These type of scales are called [steelyard balances](#) or Roman steelyards in English. For pictures of what they look like, click [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), or go to the Baidu page [here](#).

9] Dan/擔 is usually translated as “[picul](#),” which is a word with [Javanese](#) origins. This is a traditional Chinese measurement unit for mass and it is usually equated to equal 100 [catties](#) (50 kilograms or ~110 pounds). Because it is close to 100 pounds, it is also known as the Chinese [hundredweight](#). Confusingly, a dan/石 or “stone” can also be used similarly as a volume/mass unit and is usually equated with 120 [catties](#) (~160 pounds or ~70 kilograms). Since the author previously used dan/石 to list how much vegetable oil is involved, he likely made a typo here. It is just that I am not sure as to which unit he ultimately intended to use here.

[10\]](#) Dou/斗 is a [traditional Chinese unit of measure for volume](#) that was typically used to measure items like cereal grains. Since the traditional dou/斗 was around ~10 liters or ~2 gallons, it later became standardized to equal 10 liters and 2.64 gallons ([U.S.](#)) or 2.20 gallons ([Imperial](#)) as the market dou or “shi dou” (市斗). I’ve noted gallon in an editorial aside in text as a reminder for its purpose since conversion of Chinese traditional units is usually a bit difficult to pin down.

[11\]](#) “Hui zuo ren” (會做人) basically translates to “knows how to be a person” and is one of those Chinese expressions that doesn’t seem to have a specific literary origin though I did find a bunch of Chinese self-help books on how to be a success with this phrase as part of their titles. It’s basically a descriptor for someone who knows how to function well as a person and as a member of society because they have common sense, know how to read the mood, knows the rules, etc. For brevity’s sake, I’ve translated this as “knows how to act.”

[12\]](#) I’ve translated “ya yi” (衙役) as [constables](#) due to the rudimentary law-keeping roles that “ya yi” (衙役) had so they can be considered an ancient Chinese version of police officers. Both terms have similar service origins in their etymology since the word of constable evolved from the name of a job position that worked the stables while “ya yi” (衙役) literally translates to “public servant.” These were positions where men were hired to do a number of tasks that included being couriers, running errands for the officials, patrolling the area, acting as bailiffs when a court session was held, being wardens of the local jail, guarding the officials and offices, or serving as makeshift troops and riot police for times of unrest or attack. Basically, they could be responsible for any of a broad range of relatively unskilled or physical labor needed outside of their main job of acting as servants and

assistants to the officials. So they are sometimes referred to as “runners” or “gofers.” However, since “ya yi” (衙役) were not part of the army in ancient China and their level of organization were highly dependent on the officials in charge, I opted not to use “officer” or “service man” as the translation choice. For pictures of what they might have looked like, go to the baidu page [here](#). The fictional character of [Zhan Zhao](#) (展昭) would probably be considered an heroic version of a constable before he received the title of a 4th ranked Imperial Guard (For pictures of the different adaptation of this charcter, go to the Baidu page [here](#) or image gallery [here](#)).

Chapter 42: People Are Buying Astronomically Priced Cucumbers

“Little Miss, what item are we making right now? The sky’s so dark, why can’t we light a lamp?”

Shiliu placed some powder into the paper before placing it inside the little strip that Little Mister and the both of them had already made over there, rolling up the paper according to how Wang Juan had taught her. For this entire morning, nearly 1,000 had already been made and they were still continuing to make them so this caused Shiliu to be confused.

“It’ll be used for New Year’s time; it’s to replace the exploding bamboo.¹ They don’t need to be thrown into the fire. Just light them up for a bit and they’ll make a “pi-pa” sound. Shiliu, these things that you went to go buy, you must not tell anyone else, ~oh. Once this stuff meets with a bit of fire, it’ll instantly burn up. Lighting a lamp will get us all burned to death.”

Wang Juan made another string of wick and placed it gently to the side as she explained it to Shiliu. She knew a bit more about gunpowder than Zhang Xiaobao did. If she was willing to, she could even make an improvised bomb² of great power.

Shiliu only knew a bit here and hadn’t been able to completely comprehend it as she’d never had any contact with it before so she nodded and pledged: “Little Miss, you [honorific] rest assured. I definitely won’t tell anyone else. Not even to my family members will I say anything. This stuff has an even bigger sound than

exploding bamboo?”

“Big—even bigger than an exploding bamboo that’s had salt added and been thrown into the fire. If this stuff is made bigger, it can blow up and kill people.” Zhang Xiaobao also finished making a strip and placed it together with Wang Juan’s. His face and head as well as clothes were all stained with gunpowder but he didn’t dare reach out a hand to brush it off and even more, didn’t dare use his hand to scratch his head.

“Xiaobao, do all of the peasant families need to be given cucumbers? Will they talk?” Wang Juan also felt like this work was too dull. If it weren’t for her and Zhang Xiaobao and it had been any other child, they wouldn’t be repetitively doing a single thing for an entire morning.

“Give—of course, they have to be given. They already knew early on what was being grown there. It’s the Great New Year’s³ so they all want to eat something fresh. If they really were to blab, would they be able to wait till now? I’m looking at them as all not that bad—popular support can be used. Wait until next year. We’ll work hard together to make their lives even better.”

Right now, Zhang Xiaobao was extremely envious of the people in this day and age. Those who planted the land really were too honest. If you gave them a little reward, then they would remember it; if there was just a little hope in living, then they would stake their lives on doing so. Each and every family and household of the two manors all actually didn’t lock their doors—he really didn’t know how the people of the two manors had been selected before they’d arrived.

Wang Juan, seeing that the wick had been more or less done, also stopped to rest. Thinking of the two families having so many people and yet didn't have any disagreements, she also felt like happiness wasn't anything more than this. Thinking on it for a bit, she then asked:

“Xiaobao, that curved plow has already been confirmed to not exist yet. You're expecting to use this thing to increase productivity? Think of some more ideas. Are there any better ways?”

“Yes.” Zhang Xiaobao sank into thought for a while before he finally spat out a word. Then, he said: “We can have them save the seeds for some of those individual plants with good yields. After a few generations like this, high-yield variants will be able to appear and not be that unstable.

There's also another way. Wait until after New Year's and have Erniu bring two people to go on a trip to Shandong, which is over there in the Henan Circuit.⁴ Buy some stones back here and place them in the fields. We can also use them to drink water and bathe with. They can even be fed to animals like oxen or horses. Just don't know if Erniu will be able to find them.”

“What stone? They can be placed in the lands and can be eaten, too?” Wang Juan really didn't know what stone had this many capabilities.

“Wheatrice stone.⁵ I remember there are three places—the other

areas I can't remember anymore—Shandong, Liaoning,⁶ and Mongolia.⁷ This stuff is just like saline solution. Don't just look at how small of a proportion it has but the effect it produces is quite large.”

“This I do know about. So it was this kind of stone. In the past when I showered, they had this specific sort and the places that make mineral water also had it. Don't go to Mongolia as it's too dangerous—the Gokturks⁸ are occupying it, ~ne. Let's go to Shandong. What's it called? Henan Circuit? There a more specific location, ~ne?”

Wang Juan was familiar with it once she heard this name. The places it could be used were indeed very much so she rather agreed to it.

“Don't know. Who knows the specific location? Originally didn't think of this stuff and occasionally learned about it so that I had a bit of an impression here. Whenever I was outside, I drank only natural soda water, the taste of which when it's drunk isn't even that good—it's not even as tasty as the water from that river in back of the orphanage before it was polluted, ~ne.”

Zhang Xiaobao exasperatedly curled his lips as he thought of that river back then and felt a little uneasy in his heart. The water had been polluted; later, the factory had also closed down.⁹

“Fine, if you don't know, then you don't know. Shiliu, let's stop for a bit. Let's eat. Today, make some more cucumbers and dip it in sauce to eat. Also, don't forget the meat broth.”

Wang Juan wasn't ready to continue thinking on these matters either as she gave an order before going outside with Zhang Xiaobao. Shiliu put down the work in her hands and exited the room last to lock the door. After arranging for Little Mister the both of them to wash up, she then went to the kitchens to make the arrangements.

“Cucumbers, cucumbers in the winter! Our dynasty's auspicious favor! Everyone quickly come over to invite it home to eat! It's the New Year! Eat some fresh cucumbers!”

In Sanshui County, located by the yamen [govt. office] entrance, the constables were still taking turns shouting. In the beginning, there was nobody buying it as the people who came over to watch the commotion weren't affluent so when they heard that it was 30 wen [cash] to buy 1catty of cucumbers, they had all been fearfully shocked. It really was too expensive. During the summer, 1 wen [cash] money could buy 3 catties and one chicken could get quite a few in trade so who would be willing to use 30 wen [cash] to buy several cucumbers?

Magistrate Cheng and these people were in no hurry though as they hadn't expected for these commoners to buy it. As long as they came by to surround them, it was fine. By then, there'd naturally be a few servants from the other families who would learn of the news.

Sure enough, after yelling for an hour, there were two people who walked over here. From the attire on their bodies, one could tell that they were servants of wealthy families.

The two people squeezed up front and looked at the cucumbers, nodding their heads before shaking their heads. One of the people said: “It’s all right. It’s not missing the flowers or thorns. Just feel like it’s not that green. 30 wen [cash] for 1 catty is a bit expensive, ~ah.”

As they spoke, this person raised their head to glance at the constable selling the cucumbers, their eyes containing a different sort of content. The constable understood it with just one look. This was to let him lower the price for them so that they could keep that portion of the money. The constable had this kind of insight as well.

Without even needing to turn his head to ask the Lord Magistrate, this constable straightforwardly said: “30 wen [cash], you can only invite 5 catties at one time. Auspicious favors—how can they be haggled over?”

The constable essentially disregarded that demeanor of this person like they were a superior person of the first order. The other people next to him was also like so. Furthermore, there was a constable to the side who chimed in and said: “This type of thing isn’t something that can be invited by ordinary families. Auspicious favor, ~ah! Can ordinary folks withstand it?”

These words were to deliberately belittle the identities of these two people. Sure enough, once the two people heard these words, their expressions changed. This was just like they’d been insulted.

That person who hadn’t spoken yet spoke up at this time: “Don’t presume that you guys are of the yamen [govt. office], do you guys

know what people we are?”

“What people? People who aren’t even able to invite auspicious favors—what people can that even be? Of this county’s auspicious favor, Milord has already sent up a report. Not to mention you but whoever comes here, it’s all at this price. Only 5 catties can be invited at one time. You want more? Line up.”

Normally, the constable would be a bit worried but today, he basically didn’t even need to think. Who’d dare to look for trouble at this time? Not talking about anything else but the people above would also know all the same. Kaiyuan year 2, the current Holy Highness¹⁰ was waiting for the good news, ~ne.

Magistrate Cheng hadn’t gone inside and had continued standing outside. It wasn’t that it wasn’t cold outside. Since it was an auspicious favor, then it would only do for him to set an example. At this time, he also opened his mouth to speak.

“How can such auspicious favors be bargained and haggled over? Truly such profanity! Today, no matter how much money you offer, inviting it won’t be at all possible.”

Seeing that the county magistrate didn’t even bother to ask what both of their identities were, the two people were rather completely deflated. They originally had thought to get some benefits but who knew that it’d become like this? The two of them weren’t people who expressly went out to purchase supplies and had simply run across this. When the people in supply procurement for the mansion came over and bought it back, then once the Master of the mansion ate it, there definitely would be a

reward.

It wouldn't do to just miss such an opportunity in vain. The attitude of the person who had spoken first changed as a smile appeared on their face: "Auspicious favor—it indeed is an auspicious favor. Before, we two were kidding with everyone for a laugh, ~ne. How could we bargain? 30 wen [cash] for 5 catties—invite, we certainly must invite it. Load us up with 5 catties first."

Seeing him speak like this, the constable also didn't know whether to sell it or not and turned their head to look toward the Lord Magistrate.

Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang also considered it for a bit. Just before, the words had already been spoken out loud so it wasn't good to just sell it right away. But if it wasn't sold, they'd genuinely offend people and furthermore, these two people were the first to come buying. So thinking on it slightly, he said:

"Unh, since you two sincerely wish to invite it, then stand to the side and wait for someone to finish their inviting. Let's see whether or not under the snow, you two people are sincere and then, we'll talk again."

Once those two people heard this, they finally relaxed in relief. They also understand that those words that had been spoken just before had been too absolute¹¹ so naturally, it wasn't possible to instantly change their minds. To have the two of them stand in the heavy snow to wait was the best way to deal with the matter of the auspicious favor and them.

They no longer dared to say anything more. The second one to buy was the second one to buy. It was always better than giving the opportunity to another. So they docilely stood by the sidelines, allowing the heavy snow to continuously drift down on their bodies.

Here were people who wanted to buy it so the surrounding commoners also didn't wish to leave either as they wanted to see just how many people there were who'd buy such an expensive thing. Or rather, it could be said to invite.

Things really did stack up. Before, there had been two people who wanted to buy it and following afterward, there was another person who came over to inquire after the price. They were probably a maidservant as their body was actually clad in silk clothing all over. Once they squeezed inside, they saw that there were actually cucumbers being sold; then hearing the price, they didn't even say a second word and threw out 1 silver tael.

“Good. The auspicious favor's good. I'll first invite 20 catties. Just this much money.”

The surrounding section exclaimed in amazement. This truly was too much money to be had. They'd actually used 1 silver tael to buy 20catties.

The constable also hesitated again, unsure whether it should or shouldn't be sold. It was Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang who had a solution: “Here, Miss, only 5 catties of these auspicious favors can

be invited at one time. Miss can first buy 5 catties and wait till other people line up to buy it before Miss buys more.”

During the time it took to speak, the constable had already weighed out 5 catties and also weighed 5 catties for those two people. He waited for those two people to leave before he then weighed 5 catties for the maiden. After asking if there was anyone who was inviting it and the surrounding people didn't reply, it was easier to do this now as he gave 5 catties twice in succession to this maiden and that was considered as having lined up.

Taking the cucumbers, the maiden gave a slight smile: “Many thanks. To still be able to get cucumbers in winter, Milord Magistrate indeed has good abilities. Wait until I return to inform Master Yu.”¹²

The surrounding people didn't have any more people saying anything about whatever high price at this time. There really were people buying it and even people who overpaid in price.

Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang gave a look at the constable and the constable once again began to shout: “Auspicious favors! Winter's auspicious favor! Our dynasty's auspicious favor!”

Notes:

¹ “Baozhu” (爆竹) literally means “exploding bamboo” and though it now refers to [firecrackers](#) in modern Chinese, Xiaobao is using this term literally here though because before firecrackers

were invented along with [fireworks](#) and [gunpowder](#) during the [Tang dynasty](#), ancient Chinese people would heat up bamboo so that it'd make exploding sounds. This predecessor to the firecracker then got phased out and supplanted by the firecracker once it got invented though the name itself was retained over time. Obviously, the author is using artistic license here so that Xiaobao and Juan-Juan are now the first people in China to make firecrackers instead of when it was supposed to be first invented.

2] “Tu zha dan” (土炸彈) literally means “earth bomb” and is actually an abbreviation for “tu zhi zha dan” (土製炸彈), which means “earth-made bomb.” This makes more sense once you realize that “tu zhi” ([土製](#)) basically means “primitive or improvised” in Chinese as it is used to describe making something using makeshift materials or methods. Since “tu zhi zha dan” (土製炸彈) is actually a synonym of the Chinese term for [IEDs](#) ([簡易爆炸裝置](#)), I've chosen to translate “tu zha dan” (土炸彈) as “improvised bomb.”

3] Since there's a “Little New Year,” the actual New Year would sometimes be referred to as the “Great New Year” or “Da Guo Nian” (大過年) to differentiate the actual day of the New Year.

4] “Henan Dao” (河南道) or the [Henan Circuit](#) is an administrative division of ancient China during the [Tang dynasty](#). These circuits were inspection areas that imperial officials patrolled and whose boundaries were determined based on the ease at which communication with the imperial capital could be maintained. The Henan Circuit encompassed a large geographical area and included what is now modern-day [Henan](#) (河南), [Shandong](#) (山東), northern [Jiangsu](#) (江蘇), and northern [Anhui](#) (安徽).

5] I translated “[Maifanshi](#)” ([麥飯石](#)) literally because there is no real equivalent name in English for this type of stone. It was likely so named because of its appearance and use as it is a rock that is dappled in appearance due to its heterogeneous composition and was also suitable for human consumption. It was made up of several types of minerals, which include [feldspar](#), [hornblende](#), [biotite](#), and others. Other elements these rocks contained were calcium, iron, zinc, magnesium, copper, and selenium—all essential nutrients for humans. So it is actually a type of rock that contains a mix of components that are considered beneficial for medicinal or nutritional use in Asia, which is why such stones are used in water filtration or for health purposes. They are also made into various tools and utensils such as cups, pots, or bowls, etc. For pictures on what they look like, please visit the Baidu page [here](#). For the sake of limiting the pinyin used for Chinese terms and since there is no existing technical/scientific name in English for it, I will be translating the Chinese name for this stone as “wheatrice stone.”

6] [Liaoning](#) ([遼寧](#)) is a modern-day province of China that was the southernmost part of [Manchuria](#) and is also known as the “[Golden Triangle](#)” in Chinese due to its strategic location (though that is a nickname shared by a number of other geographical places). Its name is derived from combining the character of liao/遼 from the river that flows through it, [Liao River](#) ([遼河](#)), and the character of ning/寧 as in “pacified” because of the conquest required to claim this area due to its turbulent history. Liaoning is a geographical area that has belonged to many different parties in the past before as it was territory belonging to the [Zhou](#) and [Han](#) dynasties as well as subsequently part of several Korean kingdoms such as [Gojoseon](#) ([고조선/古朝鮮](#)), [Goguryeo](#) ([고구려/高句麗](#)), and [Balhae](#) ([발해/渤海](#)) in addition to having once been ruled over by the [Khitan](#), [Jurchen](#), and [Mongols](#) before it ultimately returned to Chinese control in the 20th century.

7] “Menggu” (蒙古) is the Chinese name for [Mongolia](#), which is sometimes referred to by the name of its historical predecessor [Outer Mongolia](#) or “Wai Menggu” (外蒙古) in contrast to the Chinese autonomous region of [Inner Mongolia](#) or “Nei Menggu” (內蒙古).

8] “Tujue” (突厥) is the Chinese name for the group of people known as the [Gokturks](#) who are also known as the Celestial Turks, Blue Turks, or Kok Turks. The Gokturk rulers, the [Ashina clan](#), established the [Turkic Khaganate](#), which controlled a great expanse of the [Silk Road](#), before it got split apart into the [Eastern](#) and [Western](#) Turkic Khaganates. They eventually got subjugated by the [Tang dynasty](#) under the rule of [Emperor Taizong](#) leading to his gaining an additional title of “[Tian Kehan](#)” (天可汗) or “Heavenly Khagan.” Though they ended up succeeding in rebelling against the Tang dynasty to form a Second Turkic Khaganate later on, they were ultimately defeated and supplanted by the [Uyghurs](#) and the [Uyghur Khaganate](#).

9] The Chinese used here was “huang le” (黃了) or “yellowed” which is referring to green plants yellowing, withering, and then dying. So anything that is referred to have yellowed in Chinese like a deal or a business, it basically means that it died or failed.

10] “Sheng shang” (聖上) is one of the [styles that the Emperor of China](#) might be referred to by and literally means “holy up” as in “holy on high” so it is usually translated as “Holy Highness.” If you’re wondering why it sounds like something you would call the Pope, this is because the Emperor of China was considered to be the [Son of Heaven](#) or “Tianzi” (天子) who ruled by divine favor, which is in turn based off of the [Mandate of Heaven](#) or “Tian

Ming” (天命) that determined whether a dynasty had the right to rule and explained the rise, fall, and subsequent succession of different ruling houses in ancient China’s history.

[11](#)] The words used in the original text are “spoken dead” as in the words were “spoken dead” or “shuo si” (說死) which is a Chinese idiom for speaking with absolute certainty and leaving no wriggle room or space to bargain with like it was set in stone and inescapable as death.

[12](#)] “Yu Laoye” (於老爺) is surnamed Yu/於 and “Master” is the title that servants or members of a household would use to refer to their patriarch or a master of the house—like how the Zhang Manor servants address Xiaobao’s father. However, she is likely name-dropping that she works for someone who has enough status for Magistrate Cheng to take note of here.

Chapter 43: The Sound of Firecrackers For A New Year Eve

Idler's Note: The title of the chapter likely has some wordplay since it is “Bian Pao Sheng Sheng Yi Sui Chu” (鞭炮聲聲一歲除) with “Sui Chu” (歲除) being another way to refer to Chinese New Year's Eve while “Yi Sui” (一歲) can possibly mean either “one year (old)” or “a single year” which could refer to Xiaobao and Juan-Juan being a year old or that this is their first New Year's Eve.

The 29th of the 12th lunar month, night.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan lay on top of the kang [bed-stove]. Shiliu was lying next to the two people as the three of them were all wide-eyed and awake.

“Xiaobao, tomorrow will be New Year's. We'll be bigger by a year—nominal age.¹ You have any ideas?” Wang Juan couldn't sleep and her eyes used the lamp light inside the room to look at the ceiling.

“No ideas. Passing the New Year is just passing it—got used to that long before. You lean towards me on this side; don't be up against the wall—the heated wall² on that side is scalding.” Zhang Xiaobao also wasn't asleep as he was thinking on other matters. Noon today, news had been sent over from the location of the Sanshui County's county seat that the last of the cucumbers had already been sold at 150 wen [cash] for 1 catty. It was estimated that by the afternoon, they would all be able to be sold off.

This now could be considered to have made money. Tomorrow would probably be able to have 300 or more silver taels of income so the cucumbers hadn't been planted in vain. Adding up the later cost invested in there of the money for the straw curtains, it was only just 27-8 taels so the profit had been tenfold. It had all been given to the people of the manor as well as some other places so it was rather a lot.

Over there, Wang Juan also felt that her sides were hot and moved a little bit towards Zhang Xiaobao here as she said: "I didn't say to let you have any ideas about the New Year. I was saying if you had any ideas about the manor for next year. It's only proper that we should have an overall plan."

"Unh, have ideas. This year was a special year, a harmonious year. Under the efforts of all of the people of the manors—the two families of Zhang and Wang manor—they all achieved good results on top of the establishment of a mental and material culture, upholding to our manor's constant..."

"Talk for real." Seeing that Zhang Xiaobao was going to speak these types of words, Wang Juan impatiently interrupted him. She'd really heard too much of these so she had long grown numb to them.

"It really is too difficult. No money. Next year, how to live, ~ya? I need to think of some way." Zhang Xiaobao estimated his own money for a bit. There were still some carrots that could get 1,800 silver taels. The soybean oil had been more or less sold off over these several days. The spicy sauce had just stopped selling yesterday as all of it had been bought out by people who hoped to

have a good New Year.

Overall speaking, to be able to have 1,600-700 taels as ready cash on hand was quite a lot as many people couldn't earn that much over a lifetime. But this didn't leave him satisfied since next year, the roads had to be repaired, the sites had to be plotted out, and a large amount of things had to also be purchased. Added on top of that was the money for bribing the local authorities so nothing could be missing. He'd also heard that next year, there'd be people auditing the lands.

“Then, have you thought of any yet?” Wang Juan helped Zhang Xiaobao tuck³ in that part of the blanket by his neck.

Zhang Xiaobao himself also moved a bit as the Northwest here wasn't good on this point since in the winter, beneath was the kang [bed-stove] and if it was fired up too much, it'd be scalding while above would be the chilly wind, causing suffering on two fronts. It was as well that a furnace had been lit inside the room, causing the temperature to rise a bit but they could still feel that there was a wind blowing at them from somewhere unknown.

“Talk, ~ya! What good way did you think of?” Wang Juan urged.

“It's not some way or anything. Just wait when everyone's done working at the start of spring, I'm ready to do a market fair in that area by the small bridge. There's quite a few things that were gained from barter in our storehouse. At that time, we'll take some out every day and place them there to offer to the people of the two manors to trade with. The things we get in exchange can then continue to be traded.

Every type of item will be priced by the people within our courtyard house, which is the same as an exchange value or else supplemented for by using other money. By then, the surrounding manors nearby will also have people coming over. At that time...”

“At that time, you’re prepared to collect taxes? That can’t be good?” As Wang Juan listened to Zhang Xiaobao speak of it bit by bit, she suddenly asked in interruption.

“Collect what tax? As long as the market fair is set up and we have the price-setting right, then we can get quite a bit in benefits. We can build some small warehouses to let them store things while we provide the protection and can even set up two food stalls or snack shops in that place. Whatever else, a little can be earned. There would be an additional income stream and it wouldn’t even require sparing too much effort, either.”

Zhang Xiaobao’s voice gradually grew faint as it looked like he got sleepy or he was about to sleep after saying all this.

Wang Juan seemed to be infected too as she followed him in letting out a yawn. Her head bent over, she leaned against Zhang Xiaobao to fall asleep as well. The topic just now was considered to have been settled.

Shiliu laid there, fully clothed, to watch Little Mister the both of them finally go to sleep. Getting up to check once again whether or not that stovepipe that extended to the exterior was outwardly expelling smoke, she splashed some water on top of the connected

area. Seeing that no bubbles appeared, only then did she relax and turn around to leave the room.

Going outside to inspect for a bit those two who were sitting there reading a book together, she instructed them to pay more attention to the furnace at night before she returned to lie down and also slowly fall asleep.

Sanshui County, behind the yamen [govt. offices] where the county magistrate resided.

Cheng Lingxiang hugged the little concubine in his arms as he momentarily couldn't get to sleep so he estimated how much help he would be able to get with the cucumbers that he would be giving out this time. The cucumbers had been sold off over the past few days so the news had already been transmitted to the ears of those people who would care yet there was not one person who had sent over to people to ask about it. That document that had been submitted didn't get a reply up until now either, as if it was a rock sinking into the great sea.

“Master, those cucumbers really are delicious. Don't send any more to other people. Let's keep them all.” The face of the little concubine in Cheng Lingxiang's arm was still rosy in the passionate aftermath as she extended an arm to continuously move on top of Cheng Lingxiang's body as she spoke.

Cheng Lingxiang's brow wrinkled: “What do womenfolk know? Don't give—if I don't give, then where do I go to find my future? Isn't it simple if you want to eat it? Tomorrow, I'll send a person over to send money over there. By then, they can get some cucumbers back here.”

The little concubine had also grown docile and didn't ask after matters in this area: "It's still Master who is impressive to have gotten cucumbers that are normally worthless sold off such a price. Unh, Master is also impressive in other things, too."

With this praise, Cheng Lingxiang rubbed that sleek body of the little concubine's and felt a bit ready for some more action again. With a flip of the body, passion once again reappeared.

Morning the next day, the person sent out by Magistrate Cheng set off while carrying that heavy silver in tow. There were a lot more people out in the streets today in particular as they all wanted to take advantage of the morning period to buy all of the things that hadn't been prepared in their houses yet as quickly as possible. Also, the couplets⁴ for their house hadn't been prepared yet either so at this time, they were also urgently seeking people to go write them.

When Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan had gotten up, all of the people in their house were busy, especially in the back where the cucumbers had been planted. The people of the courtyard house were picking the cucumbers that were still covered in dew to pile up to the side in preparation for sending it to each of the houses of the manor peasants after a while.

"This is New Year's. It's this side that's rather lively. I don't know if I should go back or stay at your house for New Year."

Wang Juan and Zhang Xiaobao now no longer drank milk as drinking porridge was fine and then eating two bites of pickled

vegetables made using tofu was sufficient for all the nutrition that the body required. But thinking of the New Year, Wang Juan didn't know how to arrange for it.

“To speak based on common sense, you should go back. But there are still exceptions to the rule, didn't they say that ever since we opened our eyes, there was no way to separate us and that once separated, we'd cry? So this year, you'll just pass it at my house. If that really isn't fine, then on the night of the 30th, let's go back and forth between the two houses.”

Zhang Xiaobao understood Wang Juan's meaning. She wanted to spend the New Year together with himself and this could be considered to be her having completely abandoned the matters of the past. He also thought like this. Ever since he'd arrived over here, the two of them had been fated to need to work hard together.

“Fine, then let's do it that way. When will Erniu be sent out? The time of the 15th is also taken seriously over here, ~ne.” Wang Juan lightly pushed a string of bone marrow into her own mouth as she nodded in agreement.

“The 15th won't do. It'll be too late so the New 6th.⁵ It'll be a bit tough now but in the future, it'll get better. When the location is found, have the wheatrice stones hauled back here and take advantage of when the land has all thawed to place them in there in advance. Let's see what the yield will be like.” Zhang Xiaobao drank the last mouthful of porridge as he decided.

The New Year was naturally not the same as usual. Mrs. Zhang-

Wang was busy together with the steward so she had no time to come over to see her own child. The people of the courtyard house who still had family members in the manor had all returned so the decrease in staff was obvious as all of them were a single person being treated like they were several and were directed to and fro in circles around the whole of the courtyard house. Though each and every one of them were all so exhausted that they didn't wish to walk anymore, their faces were still filled with a festive joy.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan ate and didn't train for today as they had five strings taken out of the ten firecracker strings they'd finished making several days ago to be sent over to the Wang Family by someone. They also busied themselves with Shiliu in tow.

Among the anticipation of countless people, time slowly passed by. Zhang Xiaobao both placed their flour-filled hands into the water basin to rinse off as the dumplings were now considered to have been finished wrapping in advance. For the sake of the New Year's vigil⁶ at night, they would first sleep for a while. They had the willpower for it but a little child's body wouldn't be able to withstand it.

With the arrival of nightfall, every family and household all lit up a pile of fire outside of their houses and took out the prepared bamboo poles to throw in there with "pi-pa" sounds that didn't stop. Slightly more well-off families would even add a bit of salt to let the noise be a little louder.

The two families of Zhang and Wang had also prepared quite a few bamboos. Zhang Xiaobao both first went to the Wang Family

before returning over here. So seeing that there were people who were throwing bamboo into the pile of fire, they also took out those five firecracker strings. Tonight, they'd first set off three strings; for tomorrow at midday and night, 1 string each would be set off. By then, they'd still need to go make some more to be held onto until they were lit up for the New 5th⁷ and the 15th.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang, Father Zhang, Old Madam, and Old Master also stood within the courtyard house to listen to the sound as they hugged the two children in their arms and enjoyed this type of familial feeling. When Shiliu lit up the firecrackers over there to then cover her ears and hide as an even greater commotion of noise erupted, the entire family were all astonished.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan didn't tell anyone else about making the firecrackers as they had wanted to give everyone a surprise. The result here was just great now. Not only had there been a surprise, they had even frightened people. Such a loud noise! Everyone was all dazed there and didn't react until Shiliu went over to light up the second firecracker string.

"Xiaobao, what is this stuff? Hearing it, the noise isn't little. If more are made, it can be sold for money." Mrs. Zhang-Wang was rather economically-minded so upon seeing the situation after this stuff was lit up, she thought of business.

"Mom, this stuff is called firecrackers. It's not easy to make and could even cause trouble. If too many people know of it and we're not careful, the formula might get leaked. There are lots of trades that make money so let's first not do this one." Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan didn't wish to have firecrackers become well known by

everybody right now. Thinking on it, that Wang Family's reaction at this time would probably be like this, too.

“My son speaks so. Let's go. It's time. Let's go eat dumplings.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang considered it and thought him right so no longer had any ideas as she entered the house with her family. The dumplings had already been put in the pot to cook and a hot pot had even been placed on top of the table. The younger generation first kowtowed to the elder generation in a New Year's greeting and received red envelopes.⁸ Only then did they start eating.

Watching the adults eat there in a merry commotion, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both could only select a few items that they could chew on such as duck's blood,⁹ tofu, and smaller pieces of mutton. After eating a few bites, the two of them nearly simultaneously put down their chopsticks to say to each other: “It's Kaiyuan year 3. Happy New Year.”

Notes:

¹] Nominal age is usually how “xu sui” (虛歲) is translated. Xu/虛 basically means “false, unreal.” The reason for this is that [East Asia has two ways for calculating age](#). One is the “xu sui” (虛歲) and the other is the “zhou sui” (周歲), which means “complete age,” or “shi sui” (實歲) for “real age.” The real age is the age you would arrive at if you were calculating it based on the [Gregorian calendar](#) and Western sensibilities so no confusion there. The real confusion is with the nominal or false age. The nominal age is set to begin at year 1 at birth as they start counting it from the time of conception (and then some—unless it was a longer than usual pregnancy...) so

a newborn baby would be considered 0 months age with the real age but 1 year old using the nominal age system. However, unlike with the real age where it increases on the next year of the person's birthday, the nominal age is incremented with each [start of spring](#) of the [Chinese calendar](#). So depending on where a person's birthday falls in the lunar calendar, they might end up having an unevenly higher nominal age than their real age. For example, a person born during the 11th or 12 lunar month would have been 1 year old at birth under the nominal age calculation system and then after 1-2 lunar months, immediately be considered to be 2 years old because they were born just 1-2 month before the nominal age is set to increment by a year with the Chinese New Year. So even though they are really more like 1.5 months old with their real age, their nominal age is considered to be 2 years old. A similar type of situation with age discrepancies that you can see in the West in regards to age calculations is someone who was born on February 29th and has a [leap year](#) birthday. This East Asian convention in regards to age calculation is also likely part of the reason for the confusion behind the [age controversy of the Chinese gymnasts](#) at the [2008 Summer Olympics](#) in Beijing.

2] The Chinese term of “huo qiang” (火牆) literally means “fire wall” so it can lead to some confusion because the technical term of firewall in Chinese is “fang huo qiang” (防火牆) or “anti-firewall.” However, in this case, it is a term referring to a short and hollowed out wall that was built and connected to an interior stove or furnace that served to provide a form of [radiant heating](#) since the hot air produced by the stove or furnace would heat up the wall to warm the room. So it works similar to the idea of a [hypocaust](#) except instead of it being an [underfloor heating system](#), it is a wall heating system. This is not to be confused with the concept of a physical [firewall](#) in English, which is a wall that is built to passively prevent fires from spreading if a fire breaks out in the house. To avoid confusion, I didn't translate the Chinese term

literally and opted to translate it as “heated wall.”

3] The author wrote ye/擲 but this is likely a typo since it means to “ridicule or tease” so he probably meant the homophone of ye/掖 which means to “tuck in or fold up.”

4] “Dui zi” (對子) can also be referred to as “Dui lian” (對聯) in Chinese and refers to paired [Chinese poetry couplets](#) that are written in matching counterpoint to each other according to Chinese poetry rules. So think of “dui zi” (對子) as being similar to two poetry lines that rhyme with each other in English, often with opposite or complementary meanings. This is actually a reference to the “[spring couplets](#)” or “chun lian” (春聯), which are a special type of couplets that are written especially for [Chinese New Year](#) so the content of the phrases will usually wish for luck, fortune, prosperity, or good health, etc.

5] “Chu Liu” (初六) actually means “initial 6” because the first 10 days of a month in the [Chinese calendar](#) will always be referred to as the initial plus whatever date it is. For days after the 10th such as from the 11th onward, the date is simply numbered accordingly. However, the first days after the [New Year](#) has begun tend to have different activities associated with them just like the [12 Days of Christmas](#). The 6th day of Chinese New Year is also called “Ma Ri” (馬日) or “Horse Day” because this is when [Nüwa](#) (女媧), the Chinese creation goddess, is believed to have created the horse. To differentiate this 6th from other 6ths, I will be translating it as “New 6th.”

6] “Shou ye” (守夜) in Chinese normally means to keep watch at night. However, it can also refer to the tradition of staying up all

night on the 30th, the eve of [Chinese New Year](#). The legend goes that the [Nian Beast](#) or “Nian Shou” (年獸) would attack on this night so people would stay up all night for fear of the attack until daybreak when there would be no more danger since it would leave with the onset of daylight. The Nian Beast is also the reason for why so much red and loud noises are part of the Chinese New Year festivities as they would scare it off. It is questionable whether the Nian Beast is the reason for why a year is called nian/年 in Chinese or vice versa but there is an amount of wordplay in its name since it was supposed to make an annual visit, came on Chinese New Year, and its name basically meant “Year Beast.”

7] “Chu Wu” (初五) means “initial 5” and is how the 5th out of the first 10 days of a new month is referred to in the [Chinese calendar](#). However, this is also how the first 10 days of the [New Year](#) are called in Chinese as well. For this reason, I have chosen to translate it as “New 5th.” This date is also called “Po Wu” (破五) or “Broken 5” and is a day where people would light up firecrackers in order to scare away any evil spirits and bad luck by using the loud noises to make them break and flee. The name is also a reference to the aftermath when after the bad luck had been driven off and purified for sure, the superstitious restrictions that they had to keep in observation of Chinese New Year such as staying indoors for fear of contaminating friends or family with misfortune and vice versa, not doing any heavy cleaning for fear of getting rid of the good luck inside the house, etc. were lifted. There are a number of other little assorted tradition and beliefs associated with this day but that’s the general gist of it.

8] [Red envelopes](#) or “hong bao” (紅包) can also be called “ya sui qian” (壓歲錢) or “weighted age/year money” in Chinese. This is money that was wrapped up in red paper envelopes and given by family elders to their later generations. It was originally in the

form of coins tied up with a red string to represent luck and fortune before it evolved into money that was placed into red envelopes. Typically, you are eligible for receiving the money as long as you are considered a child in the household. So yes, this means that if you are still unmarried in your 30s (marriage being a significant coming of age landmark), you could be considered to be a child since you hadn't left the nest to establish your own in [Chinese culture](#). Although don't expect stingy Chinese parents to try to pressure their unmarried children into marriage by rewarding them with money... They are smart enough to know not to do that unless it would work. Anyway, the reason for why New Year money can be referred to as “weighted age/year money” is because the Chinese believed children to be especially vulnerable to injury from spirits as an explanation for the high child mortality rate back then, so the money was meant to weigh the child down (preventing their being taken away) and act as a good luck talisman that bore the well wishes of the family elders that cherished them. Money can also be gifted to family elders by their younger generations as well to signify their hopes that their elders will be long-lived in age. Other than Chinese New Year, red envelopes can also be given on happy occasions such as marriages or graduations although red envelopes have also become an euphemism for bribery as well, especially in recent years.

9] “Ya xue” ([鴨血](#)) or duck's blood is consumed in Chinese cuisine as it is considered to be good for enriching the blood and detoxification. For the sake of reference, you can look at [black pudding](#) or [Juka](#), a type of [blood soup](#), for similar dishes in Western cuisine. Congealed blood that is consumed is generally referred to as [blood sausages](#) in English and can show up in a number of world cuisines as well. For pictures of what duck's blood would look like and some of the dishes it can be made into, you can go to the Baidu page [here](#).

Chapter 44: Thereby Comes Peasant Loyalty

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both indeed didn't sleep for a whole night. Zhang Xiaobao even went with his family members to make offerings to his ancestors. Early on the New 1st,¹ there were peasants from the manor who came over to wish a happy New Year² to the master-family. Yesterday night, everybody had been burning exploding bamboos and they had all heard that the noises coming from the master-family's courtyard house weren't the same so when each and every one of them were giving their New Year's greetings, they also inquired after it as well.

Wang Juan discussed it for a bit with Zhang Xiaobao and decided to take out a firecracker string to let everybody see the commotion. Yesterday night, it was Shiliu who lit the fire. So today, they still had her be responsible for doing it. Shiliu finally had a chance to appear in front of the peasants here now so she excitedly ran to get the firecrackers.

Returning in not a long while and hanging the firecrackers on a tree in the courtyard, she grasped an incense stick to ignite that wick that was extending outward for as much as 1 chi [foot]. The other people still didn't know what was going on when the ring of "pi-pa" sounds began to reverberate throughout the entire courtyard house.

Now, this was just too much. Yesterday night, everybody had also been burning bamboo sticks in their homes and had heard the noises from the master-family, which were all in a row and were much louder. So they were standing nearby at this moment while watching those things suddenly fall down and turn into confetti

one after another as their ears rang till they were buzzing.

A firecracker string was all gone but everybody was still in the middle of their astonishment. What exactly was this thing that was only that big yet each and every single one of them was like a thunderclap? The master-family was really amazing.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang had been frightened once already yesterday night so seeing the expressions of awe on each and every one of the peasants' faces at this time was as if this stuff called firecrackers had been made by her. As she listened to the sound of the crowd talking and then looked over at her relatively unconcerned son and future daughter-in-law, she nodded her head in satisfaction.

It was at this time that Wang Juan's parents arrived here together. Hearing the commotion from outside the courtyard, they knew that it had been the firecrackers that had been sent over to their house yesterday. Today, the two of them had also come over for the sake of this matter. Yesterday, when it had been lit up, the entire family had been frightened. Afterward, they had been happy since with such a huge commotion, it could be considered that the ox demons and snake spirits³ wouldn't dare to harm people.

Once the two people entered the courtyard house, they first gave each other New Year greetings. After the excitement had passed, Wang Juan's mother grasped Mrs. Zhang-Wang's hand as she said:

"[Older] Sister, after our family over there lit up this thing called firecrackers yesterday night, the noise was that big, ah. Today this morning when the peasants came over to give New Year greetings, they had even asked about it, ne. Knowing that stuff was all made

by Xiaobao and Juan-Juan, we hurried over here to see.”

While Mother Wang sighed over the wonder of the firecrackers, she was also a bit worried. Yesterday, one of the people who went over to light it initially didn't know the power of the firecrackers. So even though he'd been told to take cover when the firecrackers had been sent over, he still stood right next to them. The firecrackers had made a crackling “pi-li-pa-la” sound and the person who had lit the fire had been scared silly at that moment and stood there in a daze. One of the firecrackers that had been blasted out went flying over by this person's hand and exploded so that person's hand immediately swelled up.

Early this morning, the Wang Family's steward saw that this person wasn't working so agilely and only learned about this after asking before they'd hurriedly went to inform the patriarch. Here now, Mother Wang was scared. A single item blasting onto someone was that powerful so when they were being made, piles of them were made. If there was a bit of a spark of fire here, then wouldn't the two children have been blasted to nothing?

In the beginning, Mrs. Zhang-Wang had been smiling as she listened to this future in-law talk there but as she listened, she also became scared in hindsight. Hurried pulling her in-law to go over to the two children there and not saying any words, they carefully inspected one for each person, touching their faces and pinching their hands for fear that anything was missing.

“Mom, what are you [honorific] doing this for?” Zhang Xiaobao had been pinched to the point of bafflement as he looked up and asked.

“Xiaobao, tell Mom. Can those firecrackers blast people to death? Tell the truth.” Mrs. Zhang-Wang worriedly asked.

Zhang Xiaobao nodded and thinking for a bit, he replied: “They can. They can if there’s a lot. Not only can they blast people to death, they can even destroy mountains and crack the earth. The ones we made don’t have that much power. It’ll be fine if we’re a bit careful.”

“What a bit careful? Yesterday, there was someone from the Wang Family who had been injured from the blast. Their hand is all swollen. When you guys were making that ten-string, if there were to be a mishap, then what to do? From now on, you and Juan-Juan aren’t allowed to raise a hand.”

Upon hearing this, Mrs. Zhang-Wang got frightened. This son and daughter-in-law really weren’t ordinary people, ~ah. To destroy mountains and crack the earth—weren’t those actions of immortal sages?

Both of them gave the two children a lecture and had them guarantee that they wouldn’t do such a dangerous thing anymore before they then began to discuss family affairs. As they chatted, Mother Wang suddenly said to Mrs. Zhang-Wang:

“[Older] Sister, the sound of these firecrackers is big. If any family was holding a wedding or large event, it’d be lively if even one string were to be set off. Why not have people make some more and take it out to sell? It’d be another way to make money.”

“[Younger] Sister, this matter doesn’t seem to be doable. What if it causes people to learn it? By then, what to do if they use this stuff to harm people?” Mrs. Zhang-Wang had already considered it yesterday morning so she was a bit concerned.

Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were also listening to the side. Seeing that in meeting someone who would think of how to make money from this, they could only exclaim over the effect profit had on people and didn’t know whether or not the formula should be given out.

“Xiaobao, looks like my Mom has seen that your family’s daily life is getting better and better and is also a bit anxious. What do you say we should do?” Wang Juan herself couldn’t decide.

Zhang Xiaobao was also a bit hesitant and wanted to reject it but afraid that Wang Juan’s mother would be unhappy, he wanted to promise it. But if he wanted to promise it, then he was also worried about the formula being leaked.

“[Older] Sister, [Younger] Sister has a method that can let the formula not be leaked. Over here, [Older] Sister can make ready those things and [Younger] Sister will find people to transport it back so at that time, it can be made at Wang Manor. With two portions divided, the people making it would basically not even know the formula.”

Mother Wang was eager to make money so in a flash of inspiration, she thought up this idea. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang

Juan's eyes also lit up. Initially, the two of them had kept on thinking of the consequences of it being leaked so hadn't given any thought to this area.

Mrs. Zhang-Wang also inwardly agree and called over Shiliu who was at their side and instructed Shiliu to specifically make the stuff inside those firecrackers from now on so that by then, they could be sent over to Wang Manor.

This matter could be considered to have been decided upon in this manner. Over there, the Wang Family would dispatch people over here to learn how to make the firecrackers while Shiliu would individually oversee the raw ingredients.

That day, people from over there arrived. The process of manufacturing the firecrackers was simple. The issue of safety was the part that required the most attention. Shiliu emphasized over and over various kinds of details and had the people do it according to the requirements, not allowing for any error.

The morning of New 5th, starting from Wang Manor over there, they went house to house to give firecrackers to the peasants of the two manors. Each string had 100 heads and wasn't made to be that long unlike the ones that Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan had made. When a family was given firecrackers, the family would be told of the areas to pay attention to as other people mustn't be injured and fire also had to be prevented.

Every one of the peasants accepted the firecrackers in joy while giving thanks to the master-family. What they were thinking of was rather simple since if their own family set off the firecrackers,

the commotion would be great, ~ah, and those ox demons and snake spirits wouldn't dare visit their own homes.

Amidst this anticipation, night arrived. Normally, this one day of the New Year would no longer require burning the exploding bamboo but the people of the two manors still lit up the firecrackers. Several households set them off at the same time with one household following after the other. For an hour, those sounds from the two families of the Zhang and Wang Manors didn't even break off.

The people of the two manors were happy but the people of Ge Manor over there became anxious. Listening to the activity on that side of the river, each and single one of them were on tenterhooks as they didn't know what was the matter since it was just like those thunderclaps. The little kids all laid belly-down on the couches and covered their heads, not daring to poke their heads out.

Early on the New 6th, when Erniu left leading two people along with him while bearing the expectations of Little Mister, the people of Ge Manor couldn't hold back from coming over to make New Year greetings. They said it was to pay a New Year visit but it really was to ask after the yesterday's matter.

The result was that after inquiring about it, the peasants of the two families of Zhang and Wang manor began to talk. They talked of how the manor's master-family was that so and so good by giving them things for New Year's and even gave them this type of plaything called firecrackers for them to set off in order to drive away all those dirty things⁴ hidden away in the dark places.

This caused the people of Ge Manor to be envious and jealous while at the same time, also frightened. If these two manors drove away the dirty things, then wouldn't they all run over there to their own side? Not good. Whatever else was said, they had to get some of these firecrackers to better get rid of the bad luck.⁵ After asking around, they finally learned that they were sold within the general goods store that had been set up by the two manors over here two months before and rushed over there in succession.

With one look upon reaching the place, they saw that they really did have them. This had been discussed in advance by the two families of Zhang and Wang. If they wanted to sell firecrackers, then they had to let even more people know of them. Thus, they had given one string to every family on the manor.

Ge Manor's people asked after the price. Each string of 100 heads was 3 wen [cash], each string of 500 heads was 12 wen [cash], and each string of 1,000 heads was 22 wen [cash]. They could be purchased using ready cash and could be traded for using items.

When setting this price, Wang Juan's mother's breathing grew a bit strained. Shiliu had told them the upfront money and an individual string of 100 heads didn't even reach 1 wen [cash]. As for the labor costs, it was all people bought by the manor who normally were working anyway. So to let you have a bit more grease in your dishes when you ate, that was considered to be not bad.

When Ge Manor's people saw this price, they were also a bit undecided in their hearts. 3 wen [cash] could only hear a single bang like that so they really were a bit unwilling. But upon

thinking that this stuff could repel dirty things, they then felt like it wasn't that expensive. To be able to make such a loud commotion, they thought that the original cost to make this stuff shouldn't be too low.

Amongst them were two of those whose families could be considered to be making an adequate living so they gritted their teeth and returned home to take out several brined chicken eggs that had previously been pickled to bring to the general goods store to exchange for a firecracker string in preparation to be set off in the evening.

With someone taking the lead, the other people also felt that this money was worth spending and they all returned home to get things in succession. They normally also came to this general goods store to buy or trade for items and knew that this general goods store accepted anything and was fair when it came to pricing, giving them quite a bit of convenience. This was due to the two master-families of other people who especially set this up for the peasants. When compared to their own manor's master-family, they couldn't say anything other than to sigh.

In turn, there were people from Ge Manor bringing things over in exchange. And they didn't even use money to buy it as there were ones who used rice grains to trade, ones who used salted meat to exchange, ones who used some of the staple foods that had been steamed for New Year's to barter, and there were even people who pushed a large cart of paddy and wheat stalks to trade for it.

The general goods store welcomed all visitors. Those paddy and wheat stalks could be made into firewood, composted into manure,

or sent over to Wang Manor there to raise earthworms. As long as they hadn't gone bad, the edible items were fine as the servants of the two master-family's courtyard houses could eat them. There were also some handicrafts that, if more were accumulated, could all be transported to outside areas to sell as the prices of prosperous places were a bit higher.

The people of Ge Manor's constant activity elicited their master-family's notice. This generation's patriarch was Ge Family's eldest son called Ge Yingxi.⁶ Standing by the doorway and seeing the peasants were all carrying objects to go towards that side of the river, he finally couldn't help stopping a person to ask: "Wu Family's Xiaosan,⁷ where are you going here to do?"

"In reply to Master's words, I'm now preparing to go over to the general goods store on that side to trade for some things—a new thing, firecrackers, that can drive away those dirty things. When that plaything begins sounding, it's just like thunder."

Notes:

^{1]} "Chu Yi" (初一) is the generic way of referring to the 1st day of the month in the [traditional Chinese calendar](#) and literally means "initial 1" as the first 10 days of a month are referred to as the initial 10 days before every following day is just referred to by the number of its date. However, because this is referring specifically to the 1st day of the new year, I am translating this as "New 1st."

^{2]} "Bai nian" (拜年), which literally means "to greet year," is the catch-all term in Chinese used to describe all the social festivities

associated with Chinese New Year, especially since tradition expects the younger generation to pay their respects to the older generation within the family as well as to visit relatives along with friends and neighbors. It can also refer to the time period that includes New Year's day as well as the first month of the New Year as every day had associated activities in the Chinese culture. The New Year greetings were all well wishes for a good year, fortune, health, etc in an atmosphere not unlike the one that the Western world has with Christmas. Drinks and refreshments as well as gift giving during these visits are a custom and explain a great deal of the expense involved in celebrating Chinese New Year since even the poorest of families would wish to keep up a certain level of appearances for visitors.

3] “Niu gui she shen” ([牛鬼蛇神](#)) basically refer to ox-headed ghosts/demons (which look similar to the [Minotaur](#) of Greco-Roman myth) and gods/spirits with the bodies of serpents as representatives of the kind of monsters that are representative of bad luck and disaster. “Niu gui” (牛鬼) is shorthand for “niu tou yuzu” (牛頭獄卒) or “ox head jail guard” which is briefly described in the [Mahayana Buddhist text](#), the [Surangama Sutra](#) or otherwise known as “Leng Yan Jing” ([楞嚴經](#)) for short in Chinese, as a ghost or spirit responsible for guard duty of [Diyu](#) (地獄), the underground jail that was the Chinese underworld/afterlife. It is often paired with a horse-headed demon/ghost and most Westerners probably know of the ox-headed demon through the Japanese version known as the [ushi-oni or gyuki](#) (牛鬼). “She shen” (蛇神) might refer to [nagas](#), which are beings that can take the form of giant cobras and described in [Buddhism](#) and [Hinduism](#) to possess varying degrees of malevolence or ambivalence to humanity, as well as other similarly serpentine spirits. Snakes also tend to be viewed in very different extremes in [Chinese mythology](#). The more positive portrayals can be seen in the river deities as well as the two sibling gods of [Nüwa](#) (女媧) and [Fuxi](#) (伏羲) who were together

responsible for creating humanity and are described as having human faces with the bodies of snakes according to [Chinese folklore](#). However, snakes are also considered one of the Five Venoms or “Wu Du” ([五毒](#)), which include scorpions, centipedes, geckos (sometimes replaced by spiders in the list), and toads as well. In any case, the ox demon and snake spirits together are a popular expression to symbolize the evil and misfortune that people wish to keep away from their lives so the symbolic exorcism of Chinese New Year signifies a new year without any bad luck.

4] I translated “zang dong xi” ([髒東西](#)) literally. It is being used as an euphemism to refer to all the secret and hidden devils and spirits out there that might cause harm to people. The peasants are avoiding outright naming individual ones out of superstitious fear that they get summoned by name, similarly to how the word for “[bear](#)” came about as [the etymology is derived from a placeholder term people used to refer to bears that means “brown one.”](#)

5] The Chinese believed that luck or bad luck had a physical presence in the air so “hui qi” ([晦氣](#)) or “unlucky air” had to be repelled as part of the New Year festivities. This is also why sometimes people down on their luck were avoided because it was believed that bad luck could be contagious.

6] Ge Yingxi ([葛迎喜](#)) is surnamed Ge ([葛](#)) and his name, Yingxi ([迎喜](#)), means “welcoming joy.”

7] The Chinese text is “Wu jia Xiao San” ([吳家小三](#)) which means “Wu family little three” and is probably a nickname rather than a given name. It can be inferred then that this guy is the third child or son of the Wu family. A funny fact is that “xiao san” ([小三](#)) can

also be slang in Chinese for a mistress or other woman since they make up the third side of a love triangle.

Chapter 45: Taking In Four Dogs In Front Of The General Store

“Firecrackers?” Ge Yingxi grew confused.

“Yes, ~ya. Master, could it be that you [honorific] didn’t hear the commotion at the two manors of Zhang and Wang yesterday night? It was the sound of those firecrackers. Once the noise starts up over there, those dirty things don’t dare to stay over there so wouldn’t they all come running over to our side over here? So I also want to trade for some.”

Wu family’s Xiaosan was anxious to leave yet also didn’t dare to offend the master-family so he could only use the quickest speed to relay the words.

Ge Yingxi’s head dipped a bit: “The general goods store has them to sell?”

“Yes, quite a few, ~ne. There are ones with 100 heads, 500 heads, and even 1,000 heads—that’s how many of those firecrackers are in a string.” Wu Family’s Xiaosan continued to reply.

This time, Ge Yingxi didn’t say anything and waved his hand, allowing Wu Family’s Xiaosan to leave. Meanwhile, he stood there on the spot as he gazed at the river on that side in a trance as he thought over matters.

Before, the two manors of Zhang and Wang were more or less

about the same as his own Ge Manor here. Slightly better off was that Zhang Manor. After all, of the food grains that they collected, there were the portions for 100 people that they didn't need to hand over. But he didn't know why in these past few months? In the manors, the chickens and geese had grown into flocks. During the autumn harvest, they had even come over to help him eat the grasshoppers.

Later, the spicy sauce appeared as well. He also had people go to the general goods store to buy some. It really was quite good. Then even later on, they hauled back so many carrots, which were reportedly all now 20 wen [cash] for 1 catty with the price to be had with no supply for it.¹ Following that, they produced vegetable oil, which was cheaper than rendered fats.² It really was tasty when used to cook food.

With one business after another coming out here, the days were a lot better, ~ah. Looking at his own manor's peasants here and then looking at theirs, there basically was no comparison. Whenever the two manors of Zhang and Wang were mentioned by his own peasants here, they were all awash with envy.

He himself also rather wished to manage the manor well but he didn't have that ability. Then, look at those two master-families as they gave the peasants that object called kang [bed-stove] that was warm to sleep on top of and even helped to repair their houses and gave things for the New Year. He also wanted to do so but didn't have that money. He did build a few kang [bed-stove] within the courtyard house. When he slept, it really was comfortable, ~ah.

As Ge Yingxi considered these matters, he had a sort of feeling of

powerlessness. Then, seeing that there were people walking toward that general goods store again, he was even more miserable. The peasants of his own manor needed things yet had to go to someone else's general goods store to buy them.

In the past, everyone was about the same, which appeared to be nothing. Now, how the two manors over there treated the peasants underneath could only be said to be the best. With a comparison to be had here for his own peasants on this side, the people's hearts would grow unstable, ~ah. This wouldn't do. If it continued on like this, the manor would be finished. He needed to think of a solution.

Ge Yingxi had a sense of urgency so he turned around to return to the courtyard house to find a person to talk to. He also prepared to produce some new business here. Then, he'd treat the peasants a bit better.

Ge Manor's peasants didn't know the master-family also wished to let their days be a bit better and was currently thinking up a solution. Right now, they were all carrying items as they lined up by the doorway of the general goods store and waited to trade for firecrackers, ~ne. As they waited and waited, there was a person among them whose mind was lively. As they looked at the prices, they discovered that the more that was bought, the cheaper it was.

1,000 heads were only 22 wen [cash] but if switched with 100 heads instead, it would require 30 wen [cash]. Like this, it was fewer by 8 wen [cash] money. This person used his mind a bit and nudged the person next to him: "Wu family's Xiaosan, which kind are you prepared to buy?"

“Sigou,³ what, you’re buying it too? I want to buy 100 heads.” Wu family’s Xiaosan was still inwardly griping about having been detained by the master-family’s Master just now so that by the time he had arrived, he needed to line up in the queue for a period of time. From time to time, there were people from the two manors of Zhang and Wang that entered. They didn’t need to line up—who let this general goods store be opened specifically for their sake, ~ne? Just when he was lamenting this, he heard the person next to him speak.

“Unh, I’m also buying 100 heads. Why not ask the people next to us? If there are 10 who want to buy 100 heads, we can join up to buy 1,000 heads and it can be even cheaper by a bit. Then, take it apart to get 100 heads each.”

This one called Sigou began to discuss things with Wu family’s Xiaosan. Once Xiaosan listened to him, he also felt this way was cost-effective and nodding his head, he began to ask the people around him. The result was that after a few sentences of effort, the surrounding people also all understood. Several dozen people all grouped up into 10 to a team, handing over items to one person in front to have them go inside to buy it so that after it was bought, they could then split it.

In such a way, not only was it cheap but the queue had also shortened with the speed having accelerated by several times.

At this time, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan were also wandering around while being accompanied by Shiliu and a manservant, ~ne. They had arrived at the general goods store just then to see the

scene in front of their eyes. The two of them exchanged a look, both surprised. These people were smart, ~ah, to know how to gain the greatest benefit.

“Huzi,⁴ go ask. What’s going on over there—why did they all think to buy it in this way?” Zhang Xiaobao turned his head to give an order to that manservant. Huzi immediately walked over and after a moment of effort, figured it out and returned to report.

“Little Mister, there is a person called Sigou over there. It was his idea. This way, those lining up will be fewer and they can even save some money. One family can save about 1 wen [cash] in money—that could buy a chicken egg right now. During the chicken egg-laying season, the money saved would be 2 chicken eggs. Little Mister, will it be necessary to raise all of the prices on those 500 heads and 1,000 heads?”

“Good, talent, ~ah! No need to raise the prices. Sell it like this. Our firecrackers weren’t meant to be sold mainly to the people of Ge Manor but to a few big buyers. You, call Sigou over for me.”

Zhang Xiaobao was inwardly happy. Don’t just look at such a little idea. If it were him and Wang Juan, they could think of it in an instant. But amongst that many peasants, not a person had thought of it and only this person named Sigou had thought of it. This had to be said to be a bit special.

Sigou had just traded for the firecrackers and was currently splitting it there, ~ne. Everyone else’s items were also there. Their values weren’t the same so they had to be carefully exchanged to work out well.

He had just given two people their share when Huzi came over to this side and said to Sigou: “Sigou, yes? My family’s Little Mister wishes for you to come over for a trip.”

“Who’s your family’s Little Mister, ~ya? I’m busy here, ~ne. If there’s a problem, have him come over.” Sigou had been patiently counting out the number of firecrackers and upon hearing a voice, he didn’t even raise his head as he began to unhappily talk.

Once the people next to him raised their heads to look, they all recognized this person to be someone from within that courtyard house of the Zhang Manor. Considering the words he had spoken once again, their eyes looked toward that other place and sure enough, the Zhang Manor’s Little Mister and Wang Manor’s Little Miss were both over there.

Next to him, a person hurriedly nudged Sigou and said to him: “Sigou, hurry up and go over there. It’s the Zhang Family’s Little Mister calling you over. Hurry up and don’t let Little Mister wait too long.”

Ge Manor’s people all knew that the two families of Zhang and Wang here had a child betrothal. This was nothing. After all, no matter how powerful you as the Zhang Manor are, you can’t control me as a person of the Ge Manor. But they had all heard that those benefits that had been given to the manor peasants had all come from these two children. One could tell from hearing the name of the general goods store: ‘Bao Juan⁵ General Goods Store.’

They also frequently heard about some of the good qualities of Little Mister and Little Miss from the lips of the people of the two manors like when encountering people outside, they would greet people, treating them with politeness and kindness. This caused them to have a type of respectful attitude within their hearts. Thus, they urged Sigou in this way.

Upon hearing it was actually the Zhang Family's Little Mister, Sigou instantly stood up, apologetically smiled at this Huzi who had called him over, and with no words spoken, he walked towards where Zhang Xiaobao was located. Not even waiting for him to approach nearby, ~ne, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan came forward in welcome while holding hands. Once they were face to face, not waiting for Sigou to speak, Zhang Xiaobao first said:

“You were still busy over there, ~ne, and I had people come over to interrupt. If I have given offense, pardon me.” As he spoke, he even cupped his hands in obeisance to Sigou. Over there, Wang Juan also cooperated and made an obeisance.

Overwhelmed by such favor, Sigou discovered that his nose was swelling up⁶ so he vigorously blinked twice before he felt a bit better. He rushed to kneel down but was held onto by Huzi next to him.

The corner of Sigou's mouth twitched as he didn't know how he should speak. When had he, Sigou, ever received such treatment? Even more so, in front of him were the little ancestors of the two manors. No wonder the peasants of the two families of Zhang and Wang had such respectful faces whenever these two people were mentioned. Listening to these words, seeing their obeisance, it was

winter yet he truly felt like his body was warmed up.

A lot of Ge Manor's people were also all watching, ~ne. Upon seeing that another family's two kids acted like this, each and every one of them sighed once within their hearts. Look at them. They were this small yet could be so understanding. This could only be explained as their family's adults having taught them to be like this.

Then, look again at that Little Mister of their own manor. This year, he was already 6 years old but whenever he encountered the peasants, he basically put on airs of being high above them. When he gave orders, it was like he was cursing at livestock.

While the people of Ge Manor were lamenting over this, Zhang Xiaobao spoke up again: "Si... Do you have a formal name?"⁷

"In reply to Little Mister's words, this little one, Sigou, has a single cheap life—how could I have a formal name? Since I was little, I didn't even know my own surname. The person managing the household register⁸ randomly assigned this little one a surname of Xu. Little Mister, just call this little one Sigou—a cheap name is easy to raise."⁹

Sigou finally recovered a little bit though when he spoke, his voice still had a slight tremble.

"Oh, then it'll be fine to call you Xu Si."¹⁰ What contract did you sign with Ge Manor?" Zhang Xiaobao asked.

This contract was divided into two greater types. Each type also had two lesser types. It was sorted into the two greater types of people and land, which was tenant farming or indentured servitude.¹¹ The two lesser types were living contracts or death contracts. Once a living contract reached its time, they could leave. If it hadn't reached its time, leaving required paying the master-family money in reparation. Death contracts were pretty much for an eternity and cases where one left were rare.

“In reply to Little Mister, this little one signed a tenant farming living contract that was signed for 5 years. There's still the last year today before it has to be renewed.” Sigou replied, his demeanor growing more and more respectful. A single greeting of Xu Si had given him a kind of urge to cry.

“If you leave now, how much do you need to pay in reparation? I'm missing a person to work by my side and I would like to ask you to come over to help out.” Zhang Xiaobao began winning him over.

“Real, really? Little Mister, you [honorific], you [honorific] really want this little one to work for you [honorific]? If leaving now, this little one has to pay 1 silver tael in reparation or 160 dou [gallon] in food grains.”

Upon hearing that the Zhang Family's Little Mister wished for him to go over there, Sigou was so excited that his entire body was trembling as he hurriedly relayed the amount of the money to be paid. For him, to pay this money was really too much as he himself couldn't pay it.

“Huzi, go to the general goods store to see if there’s any ready cash. Take 2 taels back to give to Xu Si and have him cancel the contract there. The remaining money, Xu Si, you look and see for yourself what expenditures you need. Once done with the matter, come to the manor to seek me out.”

Zhang Xiaobao gave Huzi an order and then after saying another sentence to Xu Si, didn’t stay on this side for too long as he turned around and led away Wang Juan to leave.

After Huzi finished getting the money, he handed it over to Sigou and also left. Only Sigou was left behind as he stood there and held onto the money in a speechless daze along with the envious looks directed over at him by the other people of Ge Manor who had heard of this incident.

Notes:

1] “You jia wu shi” (有價無市) literally means “has price, no market.” There are several interpretations for this Chinese idiom depending on the context. The first interpretation is the one that I translated for and basically is a situation where the price has risen really high but there is still not enough supply to meet the demand even at the astronomical price that buyers are willing to purchase the product at. The second possible scenario this expression would be used in is if the price is so high that there are no willing buyers or market for it. The third possible way to use this phrase is for a product that has a price or value that is rising but either the market is not there (i.e. not mature enough) or there is no stable pricing index for the product (i.e. it isn’t frequently purchased

enough to be able to set a standard price). So the meaning of this expression is highly interpretative and requires contextual cues as to what the speaker or writer is trying to convey.

2] “Hun you” (葷油) or “meat oil” is the opposite of vegetable-based oils in that it’s cooking oil derived from meat or animal fat. Animal-based cooking oils are usually found in the form of rendered fats with [lard](#) the English term that specifically applies to rendered pig fat and [tallow](#) to rendered beef or mutton fat. In order to be concise but still keep the meaning clear on the origin, I have translated this term as “rendered fats.”

3] Sigou (四狗) literally means “four dogs,” which makes the title of this chapter a play on words.

4] Huzi (虎子) means “tiger child/son.”

5] “Bao Juan” (寶鵲) is basically a portmanteau of the characters found in the names of Zhang Xiaobao (張小寶) and Wang Juan (王鵲). It would essentially mean “treasure cuckoo” to those who don’t know the reason behind the store’s name.

6] The literal translation would be that his nose grew sour which is an idiom in Chinese describing the act of tearing up and getting a runny nose before a person cries or bursts into tears.

7] Because Sigou means “Four Dog” and being named a dog is rather insulting and demeaning in Chinese, Xiaobao assumes that it is a [milk name](#) purposefully chosen to disguise the person from devil and spirits that might cause their early death as a child. “Da

min” (大名) or the formal name that Xiaobao is asking for is usually a person’s true name that might only see use on legal documents. In a lot of cases, a peasant man who is the third born son might be referred to as “Third Boy” or “San Lang” (三郎) by everyone he knows instead of by formal name.

8] “Hu ji” (戶籍) is also called “hu kou” (戶口) and refers to the household registration system or [hukou system](#) that first developed as a way for the imperial government to more easily manage taxation, conscription, and census data. The core of this system is the [family or household register](#), which recorded the marriages, births, and deaths of the household as well as its members and their individual information. Because of this feature, individual identification is inextricably tied to the household register itself meaning if you wanted to marry, you really did need the permission of your parents or grandparents because they were usually the ones in control of the household register as the head of the household. This also meant that family and clan membership was a lot more important and serious business in China than in the West, reflecting the emphasis on the value of [filial piety](#). The household register was also another way to enforce the slave/servant caste system since servants that sold themselves to a family were treated as a member of the household in the register although they weren’t recorded as free citizens unless they were formally released by the household to form their own family register. The closest Western equivalent to this system is the civil registry though it is not a centralized system like the huji/hukou system. Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia all have or had a form of this identity registration system.

9] Sigou is referring to the Chinese superstition, which stemmed from the high infant and child mortality rate, that being named cheaply or after distasteful objects made it easier for the child to

grow up into adulthood since it confused the spirits that might harm the child.

[10\]](#) Xu Si (徐四) is basically arrived at by removing the gou (狗) or “dog” from Sigou’s name to be a more polite Si (四) or “Four.”

[11\]](#) “Mai shen” (賣身) literally means “to sell body” so this can either refer to prostitution or selling yourself into [indentured servitude](#). Indentured servitude as it was instituted in ancient China was a prototypical form of contracted wage slavery. Hence, this is why I will usually choose to translate such cases as “servant” rather than as “slave.”

Chapter 46: Firecrackers Resound Again At The Restaurant

It was like a spring day with [an endless stream of carriages and horses bustling about](#) as if it weren't frosty winter and [the haulers](#) were busy as they came and went in a clamorous rush in the middle of the day.

In the [1st lunar month](#) on the [New 10th](#), Sanshui County was busy with activity over here. Magistrate Cheng Lingxiang used his tongue to lick up some of the sauce that had been accidentally smeared onto the corner of his mouth when he was eating cucumbers dipped in spicy sauce just now. After savoring for a bit that clean aroma, he brought along two constables to slowly and leisurely roam the streets.

For the sake of appearing close to the people and also to not be a bother to the people, he didn't wear official robes. Dressed in casual clothing from which a belly that wasn't yet too large hung out, he occasionally stood for a little while in front of a market stall but didn't mention his identity. In this way, he gave an appearance of being a good official.

In consideration of resolving any unexpected issues that came up, two fully equipped constables followed after him and even loudly called him Milord Magistrate.

Cheng Lingxiang walked very slowly, immersed in the midst of the sound of this kind of spontaneous greetings from the people.

His face had a constant smile but his heart was thinking that idea that adept came up with really was good as his good reputation had spread and he made appearances as much as possible within the county to let people know which county magistrate had gone door to door to give away grains and oil to impoverished families without resting on the 30th.

1,000 [dan](#) [[stone](#)] of food grains, ~ah! It was not a small amount. Giving a family half a [dan](#) [[stone](#)] was enough to eat for a month. It had all been doled out to 2,000 families and he hadn't kept even a grain of food for himself. Also, that oil was like this, too. Originally, when he had gone to give them, that demeanor that each family had was so full of gratitude and appreciation that it made his heart so comfortable, ~ah.

It was all thanks to Zhang Manor. Otherwise, how could such a good reputation be gained? Listening to his subordinates talk, a lot of the people were all praising the Lord Magistrate. If it continued on like this, it seemed like being promoted up one rank also wouldn't be such a difficult matter.

Magistrate Cheng thought as he walked, occasionally making an obeisance in return to those people greeting him, his personable image increasing greatly at once. As he walked, he arrived at the busiest street within the county, which had both sides bristling with shops and the pedestrians were heel to heel.

“Bustling, ~ah! This is what this official, I look forward to.” Magistrate Cheng sighed. The two constables in back immediately came forward to flatter him. The way the three men acted were complementary to each other.

Just as they were walking, ~ne, a deafening crackling sound suddenly burst out from the place in front of them, scaring Magistrate Cheng and the people in the street with a jolt. Once this noise started up, it seemed to have no end and caused the ears of the people hearing it to keep ringing.

“Let’s go. Follow me, this official, up front to see exactly what person has produced such commotion.” Magistrate Cheng really had quite a lot of guts as hearing the noise, he didn’t retreat to the constabulary to get people to come over but directly brought along the two constables to quickly walk towards over there.

Once they arrived at the place, the noise still hadn’t stopped. Quite a few people had already stopped to observe here. There were people there loudly shouting something, trying to beat back that continuous noise.

“What is this place? Tell me, this official.” Magistrate Cheng asked the two constables as he pointed at the 3-story building in front of him.

“Milord, what did you say?” The constables essentially couldn’t hear him clearly.

“I’m asking you what place is this?” Magistrate Cheng also started shouting.

“It should be a restaurant opening. Heard people talking yesterday that there was a person who bought up a lot on this side

intending to open a restaurant called the [Thousand Taste Town Water House](#).” The constables heard him clearly this time and also loudly replied.

“What is going on with this activity?”

“Don’t know. Milord, I see that Mister Song is also standing in that place, ~ne. I’ll go find him.” The constables were also unclear so after yelling once and spotting that Song Jing-gong was there by that place’s entrance, they hurriedly ran over to pull Song Jing-gong over by the county magistrate’s side.

At this time, the noise finally stopped. The noise was gone but the uproar it had caused was rather large as quite a few people were all discussing what this object was that made such noise. It truly was too big and really gave a shock to people’s hearts, ~ah.

“Zijin is actually present too. Could it be that this restaurant was opened by Zijin?” Magistrate Cheng’s ears were still ringing, ~ne. So when he spoke, he was still shouting.

“In reply to Milord, this restaurant was certainly not opened by Student but by a person who came from elsewhere. When one hears that name, one knows that ‘Thousand Taste Town Water House’ wishes to beat down the Hundred-Flavored Pavilion and Waterview House.” Song Jing-gong also pressed on his ears. He had been close to that area previously so right now, his ears were still echoing from the din.

“Oh, does Zijin know what was going on with that commotion

from before?” Magistrate Cheng saw that it was someone’s business [opening up](#) and no problems had come up so it wasn’t good to find fault with them. But he was rather interested in that noise.

Song Jing-gong nodded his head: “I know. Those are firecrackers. Student gave some to them to use for opening up—100,000 bursts.”

“What are firecrackers?” Magistrate Cheng felt like his surroundings right now was all chaos so he led Song Jing-gong to an area with few people before asking. His speaking volume was also not as loud as before.

“They’re items that Zhang Manor made for the sake of some festive matters to be lively and can even help with the publicity.” Song Jing-gong was also a bit more comfortable than before as his ears weren’t ringing as badly.

“Oh? It’s Zhang Manor again? If this whatever 100,000 bursts of firecrackers were given by you, Zijin, how much money would have to be spent?”

Originally Magistrate Cheng was still astonished, ~ne, but upon hearing that it was Zhang Manor, a person appeared in his mind above all. With that person, anything that appeared was within reason. He was rather surprised at that person’s generosity though. With so much, how much money was it?

“Milord, not that much money. It’s only just 2 silver [taels](#). This

stuff is cheap. To spend 2 silver [taels](#) or more on an opening is a bargain. This time, Student gave it away for free to better let other people know that there is such a thing. Then, they can go buy it.”

For Song Jing-gong to explain it, this was both Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan’s idea. If it was sold directly, people might not buy it. So first give away some, wait for it to have an effect, and then other people will buy it. It was being sold for 2 or more [taels](#) of silver and the cost wasn’t worth much money.

After he finished explaining this, Song Jing-gong saw that Magistrate Cheng also nodded in agreement so he continued to talk: “Also, [this thing can deter evil](#) just like the exploding bamboo that is burned for the New Year. This year, Zhang Manor used this for the New Year.”

“Oh? There’s also this function? Right, ya! Exploding bamboo, ah! This stuff is louder than exploding bamboo. Evil deterrent—it certainly deters evil. Before, there was a lucky auspice and afterward, an evil deterrent appeared. That person is indeed powerful. If that’s so, then Zijin should also sell some to the constabulary. 20,000 bursts—it’ll be perfect to be able to use for when it’s time for [Yuanxi \(the 15th\)](#).”

Magistrate Cheng worked his mind and thought that in this way, it would be even livelier. 5 silver [taels](#) would be enough for 20,000 bursts. It’d be worth it to produce such a singularly large activity.

“Milord doesn’t need to spend money to buy it. The manor is currently having many people rushing the labor, ~ne. It’ll be sent over to Milord the day after tomorrow.” Song Jing-gong didn’t

need to go back to consult with Little Mister for this sort of matter as he understood how he should operate. Several silver [taels](#) from the constabulary weren't worth asking for and to be able to use this little bit of stuff to give away as a favor was still rather not bad.

Magistrate Cheng thought for a bit and didn't continue insisting on wanting to give money. Their manor had already given away plenty of stuff and they didn't lack this little bit. Just that 1,000 [dan](#) [[stone](#)] of food grains needed 100 or more [taels](#) of silver, ~ne. The things the manor did were really generous.

With the firecrackers, Magistrate Cheng's mood was even better so he didn't resume his stroll and brought the two constables back with him after speaking a few words with Song Jing-gong as he wanted to prepare well for how the 15th was to be passed. This year wasn't going to be merely a matter of a lantern.

Magistrate Cheng returned to the constabulary in a good mood. He originally assumed there wouldn't be any problems but who knew that once he entered, the Deputy Magistrate Zhang Mingsheng inside rushed over to find him.

“Milord, our prefecture sent out an urgent document stating that our prefecture has already sent up a report on the lucky auspice and for the sake of separating the truth from falsehood, they will send the [Merit Advisory Officer](#) to Sanshui County on Yuanxi (the 15th).”

“Oh, I know. Today is already the New 10th of the 1st lunar month and only now did they have someone come over. And 5 days

later too. The cucumbers will all be eaten up. They just recalled the lucky auspice. Come on, fine. Two days later, Song Jing-gong will come to give firecrackers to the constabulary. I'll tell him to have him handle it there. Those cucumbers should have grown bigger by quite a lot. The harvested crop that can be eaten, we'll eat. By the time they arrive, there'll be no more."

Magistrate Cheng listened to the deputy magistrate finish speaking and then took the document to look at it before curling his lips while replying. He really was a bit dissatisfied with the people from above. To think of rushing it at this time, what were they doing earlier? He didn't even know if those cucumbers that had already sent up had been eaten by them or had been given away to other people.

"Milord, must it be necessary to kill off those cucumbers plants? Can a portion be transferred away? It's only the beginning of spring here. There'll still be a good long period of time without cucumbers."

Deputy Magistrate Zhang Mingsheng was a bit reluctant. He had an elderly mother in his home whose health had never been that good and liked to eat one or two light bites. The cucumbers he brought back were basically given to his mother to eat. Seeing that his mother was able to eat a bit more food, he was also happy. If these cucumbers were suddenly no more, then what would Mother eat, ~ne? If it really wasn't feasible, then he'd ask Song Jing-gong for some carrots. If stir-fried, that stuff was not bad to eat.

Magistrate Cheng thought this way as well but he had no solution. He couldn't sell out Zhang Manor as based on that ability

of theirs, there might be even better things coming out later on. Plus with those two adepts, he might have to make a request of them by then.

So hearing the deputy magistrate mention it at this time, his mind worked and he thought that it seemed like it was feasible. Produce some fresh cucumbers for the people to see when they arrive. When they went to look at the cucumbers plants, move a portion away first. A few should be able to survive. By then, he could also eat some.

Thinking like this, he didn't wait any longer for Song Jing-gong to come over but arranged for a person to go to Zhang Manor to notify them. To let them believe it, he even had the person bring along the document that had been sent down from up top and even disclosed his own idea.

The one who went to Zhang Manor was that constable who had gone there before. Once he heard he was to go to Zhang Manor, he was immediately overjoyed. The last time he went, the hospitality they had given was not bad. When he was about to return, he even received a bit of money. So to have another opportunity this time, he didn't delay any bit after consenting and actually rode a horse, leaving in a galloping rush.

This horse-riding speed was sure quick. It usually required half a day's journey driving a carriage. On a fast horse, not nearly 4 hours was needed to reach the destination. Upon seeing such a rapid paced horse, the people who were unaware of why even assumed that it was a 600 [li](#) [mile] urgent report, ~ne.

When the constable arrived at the manor, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both were studying with their father, ~ne. The two of them quite admired Father Zhang. Once he began speaking on scholarship, there'd be a literary quote within a phrase that was pulled out. Within the literary quote would be another phrase and then within that phrase would be yet another literary quote.

This was with both Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan. If they were like other children instead, they'd already be terrified into tears by so many things. Here now, Father Zhang had enjoyed himself. If teaching students could be this easy, then the teacher probably was already famous. With these two children, only once was needed to teach whatever was taught. After 2 days, the two children would ask a few questions. Once he explained it, then they had learned the taught subjects.

“Che shui ma long” ([車水馬龍](#)) is a 4 character couplet that is nonsensical when translated literally since it means “carriage water horse dragon.” However, it actually abbreviates the sentence “車如流水, 馬如游龍” which means “carriages like a flowing stream, horses like a roving dragon” and is used to euphemistically describe heavy traffic and busy streets.

I've translated “la jiao” ([拉腳](#)) as “hauler” instead of using its literal meaning which is “pull leg” since it is a colloquial term to describe people who make a living by hauling goods or passengers to and fro on a predetermined route. For passengers, this was one of the prototypical forms of semi-public transportation in ancient China but was not standardized since routes and their stops were decided by the individual driver or hauler. In terms of the transportation of goods by land, this could be considered to be a form of a private delivery service by coach or carriage.

“Zheng yue” ([正月](#)) is the first lunar month of the [Chinese calendar](#) and the first half of the month is devoted to [Chinese New Year](#) festivities and rites. The name means “main moon” since it is

the month that marks the beginning of the year.

“Chu Shi” ([初十](#)), which I have translated as “New 10th,” is the 10th day of the celebrations for [Chinese New Year](#) and can also be referred to as the “stone holiday” (石頭節) or Millstone Day ([石磨日](#)). The superstitious taboo of this day is also the reason for its name as it is believed to be bad luck to handle anything to do with rock or stone on this day so it is discouraged to build houses with stone or touch the millstone. Since stone and the number 10 are homophonic in Chinese (both spoken as “shi”), this might be the reason why stones got associated with this day in the first place.

I literally translated the name “Qian Chang Zhen Shui Ju” (千嘗鎮水居) character by character as it is hard to convey the total meaning of the name in brief. Basically, the name of the restaurant is supposed to convey the image of a residence by the waterside that is a town of a thousand flavors. Also, there is likely a connotation of suppressing the competition within the word choice as the character of zhen/鎮 can also mean “to crush.”

“Kai zhang” (開張) literally means to “open up” but it has the implications of a business opening up for the first time ever and not just referring to a store or business starting work for the day. So think of a ribbon cutting for the ceremonial opening of an establishment versus simply turning on the lights for work.

I translated “bi xie” ([辟邪](#)) literally but it is also noteworthy that [bixie](#) is the name of a Chinese mythological creature that could drive off evil and had an exorcising effect on it. Other than being associated with the eponymous divine beast, “bi xie” is a quality that can be applied to various items like jade accessories, talismans, etc. that were known for their protective purity as well. In this case, the cacophony that firecrackers make are considered to deter evil since it was believed the sudden explosions of sound would scare away things like the [Nian monster](#), ghosts, devils, and bad spirits. There is a certain poetic contrast in the mention of bixie here since “xiang rui” (祥瑞) or “lucky auspices” similarly

shares an association with divine beasts like the [qilin](#) (麒麟)

“Yuan Xi” (元夕) literally means “original evening” and is short for “evening of the original/first lunar month.” This refers to the 15th of the 1st lunar month of the Chinese calendar which is the first full moon of the new year when a [lantern festival](#) is held in celebration of it. Other names that this date or holiday is more commonly known by is “Yuan Xiao Jie” (元宵節) or “Shang Yuan Jie” (上元節). This day marks the end of the [Chinese New Year](#) celebrations and some of the festivities can include competitions over the lanterns like winning lanterns by solving riddles and so on and so forth. The lanterns usually symbolized luck or love so the lantern festival itself had a romantic matchmaking association as well, explaining why it is sometimes commercialized as a holiday similar to Valentine’s Day in modern times.

It’s difficult to literally translate “Si Gong Can Jun” (司功參軍) into an official title that makes sufficient sense on its own mostly because historical Chinese titles could be wildly variable for what is essentially the same position depending on what level of the government or political circle it was at since sometimes the names evolved from different points in history and sources. So literal translations sometimes are misleading—think of how prime minister, chancellor, or premier can be titles that are applied to a modern head of state and used interchangeably but not always as it depends on the system of government and their traditions. This is a position that started as a staff position that handled the administrative work for the military before it evolved to become a civil advisory role in general. Starting from the [Sui dynasty](#), it specifically denoted an administrative official at the prefectural level who oversaw the subordinate officials, managed the ceremonial rites, and other matters in which merit or demerits had to be verified and recorded.

Chapter 47: Transplanting Cucumbers To The County Seat

Father Zhang was currently speaking with enjoyment, ~ne, when the constable dashed inside with his head full of sweat. In this not so warm weather, this really was hard for him to do. Once he came in, he offered that document up and then recounted the county magistrate's words as originally spoken like he had been instructed to.

After the arrangements were made for the constable to withdraw, Father Zhang looked at the document and, assuming that the two children couldn't read it, explained it to them. This lesson could only stop then as Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both returned to their own room to consider ways to deal with this.

"Xiaobao, that county magistrate said to have us transfer a portion. What do you think?" Wang Juan contemplated the consequences of doing this. It seemed that those cucumbers plants that were transferred wouldn't easily survive.

"I agree. Transfer them away. Have the cucumbers in one room be moved away and transplant them to someone else's land with cucumbers from the summer. Do it today. Don't pick the cucumbers and just place them like that." Zhang Xiaobao assented.

"They'll be frozen dead."

"Right, ~ya, let the cucumbers plants freeze to death. That will be the lucky auspice. Those that are remaining, we'll continue eating

and we can even eat for quite a long time, ~ne.” Zhang Xiaobao said while blinking his eyes at Wang Juan.

“Smart! People who can be swindlers are just not the same. If that house is seen by the person, then it’d need to be broken down. But it’s too large of a project. Shifting away plants from a portion of the land will mean less money is lost, ~ne. Right now, it’s the time when [there is no yellow or green to be seen](#).” Wang Juan understood here now as she reached out to pinch Zhang Xiaobao’s face while she praised him.

Zhang Xiaobao didn’t move one bit, his face expressionless as it was pinched. It was only after a good while that he did open his mouth to speak: “Tell those peasants of the manor to not leak this [in spite of challenges](#), threats, or bribes from other people. You make the arrangements on this matter since you’re an expert at it.”

“All right. But that day, there were also children from Ge Manor watching there, ~ne. What to do?” Wang Juan was actually rather familiar with these matters and suddenly thought of those people from the outside manors on that day.

Zhang Xiaobao also smacked his head in regret. What a lapse. Back then, he hadn’t been making so many calculations. Those children would definitely talk to other people upon their return and the adults would then also know. What if the people coming to investigate were so idle with nothing to do that they went off and asked the people of Ge Manor? Then what would they do? This was all very possible.

“So what to do?” Wang Juan also couldn’t think of a solution.

“Yeah, what way is there, ~ne? How should it be dealt with, ne? Buy up Ge Manor? Not easy, ah. Got it. Those cucumbers plants had already been brought over to the constabulary in advance by the Lord Magistrate so just plant them there, ~ne. Let’s do it like this.”

That small hand of Zhang Xiaobao’s continually tapped his leg. This was a habit of his. Whenever he encountered a difficult issue, he was like this. Finally, he thought of a solution and Wang Juan also nodded in agreement.

“The county magistrate has already.....? Fine, understood. Then, just do it like this. Have that one house completely moved over there. Prepare an extra two carts. Right now, there are places where the snow has started to melt. Have the county magistrate find a better piece of land to stick the cucumbers in. Pay attention to keeping them warm. Once the people from above have arrived and there are still cucumbers plants surviving, then that’d be even better.

The entire matter will have no relation to our manor. If there really are people coming over to the manor to look, then I’ll burn it all up in a fire. Whatever else is said, this method can’t be leaked unless it can be exchanged for a gain that can tempt us. Not only cucumbers can be grown with this method.”

After the two of them made the decision, they had people go seek out that constable. Today, they wouldn’t treat him to a meal but gave him 2 silver [taels](#) and had him immediately return to relay

this matter to the county magistrate and have the county magistrate make all of the arrangements on this business.

The constable also knew that this matter was a bit hard to do. So taking the money and drinking a belly full of water, he mounted the horse that still hadn't completely recovered to hurriedly dash back again.

After the constable had left, Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan also began to get busy. There was no way to predict on this matter, especially under the precondition of Zhang Xiaobao not having any acquaintance with the people coming down from the prefecture.

One bundle after another of firewood was piled up on the side on the land in back. If there was any bad news that was relayed, then this firewood would be lit. Also, someone had already placed some logs up against the wall so that by then, the wall could be demolished.

Once everything had been properly prepared for, the sky had already darkened. Zhang Xiaobao and Wang Juan both could be considered to have released their breaths as they lay down on the kang [bed-stove] and didn't even read but took an early rest.

Inside the constabulary of Sanshui County here, Magistrate Cheng also learned of the events over there. After thinking on it, he outlined a portion of land in the area by the river. He first had people get rid of the snow and then dig out the soil underneath. Using fire to warm up the frozen soil on the very bottom, the soil that had been dug up was processed slightly before it was replaced back again. Only then was everything considered to be complete.

The second day, the peasants of Manor Zhang here all began to move out as they helped to carefully dig up one cucumber vine after another from within the dirt with the bottom still carrying soil. The frames up top were repositioned like new and placed into carts that had cloth wrapped around them to block the view. Then one cart after another began to be hauled towards the county seat over there.

The items on the carts were as precious as gold so the speed that the carts travelled at was slow and even slower still. The result was that after an entire day, they hadn't reached their destination yet. When night had fallen, they even had to look to see if there were any people in the surrounding area before lighting a fire to keep the cucumbers plants on the carts warm.

On this mission, Song Jing-gong and the Wang Family's steward personally came to hold down the line. The two of them also didn't dare to sleep and could only sit by the fire to keep the evening watch.

"Steward Wang, thirsty? Eat a cucumber." Song Jing-gong picked 2 large cucumbers from within one of the carts. Not even washing it and simply using his hands to rub on it to get rid of the thorns, he opened his mouth to take a bite, chewing on it with a loud gaba-gaba sound.

Steward Wang received the cucumber but also looked in concern at that cloth-covered cart that Song Jing-gong had just opened so thinking for a moment, he asked: "Mister Song, will the wind chill get inside that cart?"

“Who cares if it will, ~ne? Actually, for these things to be brought over there, transporting them back again isn’t to be expected. It’s for the sake of dealing with a few people. It’s fine as long as several survive.” Song Jing-gong spoke without a care as he continued chewing on the cucumber. If one didn’t listen carefully, his voice was unintelligible.

Steward Wang contemplated it for a bit before nodding his head: “Mister Song speaks so. In the end, since it won’t be brought back, then that’s perfectly fine. The coachmen will get one each.”

That cart that had just been opened up by Song Jing-gong was once again opened up. The coachmen used the quickest speed to find and pluck the larger cucumbers before handing them out.

These people surrounded the fire, chatting as they ate. After waiting for the horses to rest up a bit, they were kitted out once again and herded in front of the carts. It would be the middle of the night before they’d reach the location.

Song Jing-gong and Steward Wang originally assumed that they’d have to stay outside for a night before talking the next morning, ~ne. But who knew that once the cart team arrived, there were people from the constabulary coming to receive them as one torch after another lit up to go directly towards where that land by the river had been plotted out.

This side already had people waiting there. Magistrate Cheng had also personally come over. He had never really seen cucumbers

plants before though he had eaten quite a few cucumbers these days. Seeing that the cart team had come over, he bade people to have the surrounding area properly watched over and to not permit any other people to approach.

After the cloths of one cart after another were rolled up, those cucumbers plants appeared in front of their eyes. Eating cucumbers and seeing plants sprouting with cucumbers were two separate matters. Upon seeing the plants with so many cucumbers still hanging down from them, other than the people who brought them over, everyone else including Magistrate Cheng all displayed expressions of surprise.

“It surely isn’t common. Just the sight of them is comfortable and makes a person eager to personally pluck one to get a taste of it.” Magistrate Cheng said with feeling. The surrounding constables and the deputy magistrate also all nodded their heads, especially the deputy magistrate—he had already decided that he would bring his mother over to see them tomorrow when it was light out. This kind of exuberant vitality in the midst of snow really gave people too much of an impact.

After a command from the county magistrate, the constables began to place one plant after another into the holes that had already been dug out. They lightly sprinkled on top some water that had come from indoors and wasn’t that cool, then used the cloths that had been brought over with the carts to wrap around them so that the top was also blocked from view.

After doing all of this, they still weren’t done as a circle of fire had been lit up outside of the cloth and a person had been assigned

every 5 paces to keep watch to ensure that the fire didn't burn the cloth.

“Milord, it's already done here. The chill is heavy late at night so one should return to rest for a bit.” The deputy magistrate found two articles of heavy clothing to wrap himself up in, having decided to keep watch here as he urged Magistrate Cheng to go back.

Cheng Lingxiang nodded and made ready to leave. After taking a few steps, he then returned: “Never mind. If I go back, I still won't be able to sleep. Have someone go get a bit of something to eat and drink. I'll wait here and keep watch.”

Cheng Lingxiang really couldn't relax. Today was only the 11th and there were still 4 days' time. The most worrisome was this first night. If they made it through, then everything was easy to deal with as they'd just act the same accordingly tomorrow. If they didn't make it through, then there'd be a bit of trouble when the people from above came by.

Song Jing-gong's group was rather uncaring as they each found a place to rest. After having continuously rushed on their journey, their people were sleepy and the horses were fatigued.

The second day, when that dazzling sun that had no way of letting people feel much warmth from it rose, Magistrate Cheng rubbed both of his bloodshot eyes and pulled open the cloth a crack to look inside. Even after a few glances, he still couldn't tell if they had succeeded or not so he could only call over a person who knew about the farming trade. This person simply swept it with a glance

and was clear on its rough status.

“Milord, estimate that 3/10ths of the plants will die within 3 days or so. It’s not so easy to tell for the remainder. For roughly 2/10ths to be able to survive over the next 10 days would be quite good.” This person considered carefully before speaking to Magistrate Cheng.

“Good, good, that’s good. If 3/10ths die, then let 3/10ths die. By that time, for whichever one is about to die, pluck all of the cucumbers on top. Keep the large ones to make dishes with while the small ones will be pickled.”

Upon hearing that there were plants that could still endure for a very long time, Cheng Lingxiang could be considered to have his mind completely set at ease. Halfway shutting his eyes, he had people send him back to the residence in back of the constabulary and handed all other matters over to the deputy magistrate.

Seeing that he was the highest official here, Deputy Magistrate Zhang Mingsheng was reassured enough to nap for a bit, too. Once the sun was a bit higher, he would have someone return to bring his mother over to see.

After a while of work, Mother Zhang arrived. The old lady’s age wasn’t high as she wasn’t even 60 yet, ~ne, but her health wasn’t that well. She was helped down from the carriage by Deputy Magistrate Zhang Mingsheng. Then, looking left and right, she asked:

“My son, for what matter have you called Mom over for? Have you caused trouble? Rest assured. Mom is here. Mom will take care of it for my son. If it really isn’t fine, Mom will go begging [to your uncles](#).”

From these few words, Song Jing-gong, who had already come over by their side, knew that this old lady came from a [scholarly background](#). Thinking of how he had no relatives at all, he couldn’t help sighing. If his own Mom were still here, she would definitely protect him like this, too.

“Mom, your child didn’t cause trouble. It’s good news. Mom, the respected you should follow your child. Your child is bringing the respected you to see something good.” Deputy Magistrate supported his mother to walk bit by bit towards that area that had been blocked off with cloth and lightly pulled it open a crack to allow his mother to see inside.

“Cucumbers, so many cucumbers. My son, how can this be real? Who has such great ability to plant cucumbers in this season? It is the blessing of our Great Tang, ~ah.” Once Mother Zhang took a look inside, those eyes that had originally been muddy immediately brightened up a lot as she spoke excitedly.

“Qing huang bu jie” ([青黄不接](#)) literally translates to “green and yellow not connected” with the green referring to crops that have yet to ripen and yellow to crops that are ripe. This idiom refers to the time of year when the fields are fallow and nothing is growing at all. It can also be used to refer to a shortage in general without referring specifically to food or greenery since it can denote a sudden break in a connected flow of events or things like a lack of heirs in the line of succession.

I've roughly translated “ji jiang fa” ([激將法](#)) as “challenge or dare” but it's an imperfect word choice since it is referring to behavior where an implicit challenge is issued by the speaker when they make a claim deliberately designed to goad the listener into action to disprove the speaker's claims to the contrary. In this case, Xiaobao is likely describing a possible situation where the peasants could be tricked into letting something slip by being told that they don't really know anything important so that in defending their pride, they do reveal something that they otherwise wouldn't have. The term literally means “incite general method” because it has its origins in a quote from [Journey to the West](#) that basically translates to “inviting a general doesn't compare to inciting a general (to action)” ([請將不如激將](#)).

“Jiu jiu” ([舅舅](#)) is the way to address one's maternal uncles. Contrary to the terms used to address paternal uncles, maternal uncles are addressed the same way regardless of whether they are older or younger than the mother. But similarly to how the terms for paternal uncles can be confusingly modified to become the term that brother-in-laws or a husband's brothers are addressed by the wife, jiu/[舅](#) can also be used by a husband to address his wife's brothers. So context can greatly modify terms of address.

I translated “shu xiang men di” ([書香門第](#)) as “scholarly background” but that doesn't fully translate the connotations of this expression. This term literally means “book fragrance pedigree” with the characters of “men di” ([門第](#)) for pedigree or status literally breaking down to mean “door rank” as a residence's doors or gates visually represented the face of a family and reflected their social rank. There is the implication that such families had a history so steeped in scholarship that the fragrance of books wafted from their doors or gates. So considering the history of the civil exams and an ideal of a meritocracy through education as well as the sheer difficulty in acquiring books back then before printing en masse was invented, someone born and raised in such a family would be highly ranked or respected.